

MAY EDGINTON

Two Lost Sheep

MACDONALD : LONDON

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Chapter I

MRS. WYCOMBE had always said she had a good husband; a devoted husband, though he did not always show it. "Well, it's up to the woman to show she loves her husband," she had said more than once when neighbouring wives—in her house—had sat together over a cup of tea, speaking acidly of how marriage robbed a woman—looks, figure, leisure, excitement. Mrs. Wycombe always laughed, though with sympathy. "I've got a good husband—and I know it," she would say; and no woman hinted at contradiction.

It was known that Charles Wycombe had his difficulties and tantrums. "Well, I love him," she used to say playfully. And even after he had turned Bertie out as a good-for-nothing, though she had lost weight, though she seemed to be pining away and the doctor spoke frankly, she never said anything that would anger Charlie. And this was because she knew the temper of him just as well as she knew his difficult, dumb, ferocious love for herself. She never said a word about it; just grew thinner and thinner till Charlie broke down and said: "Call him back. You shall have your boy, my girl."

Only—after the six weeks they had waited—Bertie could not be found. They advertised then—it had seemed to Charlie to be humiliation; they had employed private inquiry agents. . . . Bertie was not.

So she had quietened herself. Often she found Charlie looking at her like an offending dog; with illimitable sorrow or shame, or both; dumbly; even wishing—against his possessive love—that she would have another child to solace herself—not knowing that her heart would

weep till she had found the lost one, and that there is no replacement.

And when Charlie died, she close beside him, arm beneath his darling head, he was a penitent man. "If I could make amends," he had gasped pitifully ; and said no more.

Mrs. Wycombe sat today at the head of the dining-table, in the familiar dining-room with its white walls and soft crimson curtains, its painted ceiling reflecting the garden. Charlie's funeral was over. She had stood beside the grave, hearing the clergyman reading the service ; and looking at that other plot just alongside. Yes, here she would lie beside him. . . . And through her head was a thought sharp as an arrow : " I do not want to lie here till I have had Bertie back."

This thought reared itself like a strong tree from its irresistible roots in her mind, as she sat at the top of the table, ready, with her family round her, to listen to the will about which not one of them knew any item. No. That Charlie had done by himself ; he had just brought his rough draft to his lawyer and asked for it to be put into proper condition. And now Mrs. Wycombe heard it with the rest ; and it did not take long.

Charlie had not meant to perplex or hurt her ; nor to make her afraid ; he had just paid her the sincerest compliment, put into her sole hands the most complete trust, that were in his power to pay and to give.

He had left her everything.

There was no brick of the house, no stone on the ground, no item of treasure, no penny in the bank, over which she had not sole and complete control.

" I think it is all remarkable, clear," said the lawyer, laying the will down. It was always interesting—that cynical moment when one looks at the faces of the listeners.

Down the length of the long table—Heppiewhite ; this

manor-house was filled with beautiful furniture—Mrs. Wycombe looked at the lawyer. At the faces round the table she could not look.

She had been silently afraid lest Charlie should leave her in the hands of his sons entirely. But no. He had done worse.

She had all.

The sons and daughters must wait.

She did not want the family crown.

She looked at the faces at the table. Lady Watmer's face; Mrs. Pater's face; then . . . Oh, wasn't that the face of the lost daughter—misty, floating near? That wayward girl who was in herself a gleam of light—who had married or not . . . who had gone . . . where? For a cloudy moment that face surely gazed at her among the others?

Her eldest son Charles and the face of her fourth baby, Robert, looked at her steadily. And in that moment their faces were the faces of strangers.

She could not bear it. "I am a very strong woman," she said to herself, "but this I could not bear."

She was overwhelmingly aware that Charlie's utmost gesture of trust and love was unacceptable.

"Mr. Newland," she said into the silence; and then, because neither she nor Charlie had called him thus formally for many years, "Morris, I was in no way prepared for this."

There was silence among her family; but Newland the lawyer answered, speaking quickly.

"I know it. I tried to persuade Charlie. But this was how he saw it. 'The girls are married,' Charlie said. . . . I said that they—their husbands—might be surprised. 'We are not sure if Irene is married,' I said. He said that was quite true; but that it came to the same thing—I did not agree. But he stuck to his own idea, Diana. You must have it all; and at your death it could be divided. 'What she cares to make over as presents is a different thing,' he

said. In fact, Diana, you can do as you think fair and right."

"Let us do it at once," she said. "No time like now. This must be altered. Had he ever talked with me about it he would have done differently."

She felt that she would never quite forget the horror of this moment when her children, fruit of her body, fed from her breast—no ; no ; she had not fed them ; that Charlie had forbidden ; doctors did the bidding of husbands in advising such a matter ; led by her loving hands—no ; no ; she had not the chance of leading them—her men children, in the moment of time that had just passed, had—unconsciously—hated her. The moment was so brief that it passed without a mark except for the extra knowledge that it had given to her heart. She looked very calm. "We should have a valuation as soon as possible, Charles dear."

Her eldest son nodded, not looking at her.

"Yes. . . . Will you see to that, Morris," he asked the lawyer, "as soon as you can?"

"Of course. But do you think it possible—that you and Robert and your sisters—that I could have some sort of idea as to your thoughts as to your own portions?" As Newland asked this he looked at them all separately, and then down at his papers. "Proportionately, of course, I mean."

There was a silence. Still he looked around at the faces ; Lady Watmer's cool and still ; Mrs. Paters' with a slight alertness quickening it ; both the men—Charles and Robert—hard and quiet. The sons-in-law appeared politely indifferent. Well, both were wealthy men. . . . Though a lawyer knew that this might make no difference to their swift thoughts.

Robert said : "A valuation shouldn't take too long, should it, Charles?"

"A week. Either of us can size up the value of the Shorthorns. We've got the most up-to-date machinery ;

the land's prime. You could get almost any bid for it—in reason. The other farms are well let. . . .”

Diana moved quickly in her chair; and stilled herself again. Both Charles and Robert saw it, and glanced at each other for a moment—no more. “Probably . . . as you say,” Robert agreed, “but we mayn’t want to sell. As the second son I suppose I get second choice—the girls don’t seem to be speaking.”

The brothers-in-law smiled for a moment, glancing at each other; and remained silent.

“As a matter of fact, I daresay you know I want to marry,” said Robert.

“And you know I do, too,” Charles said. “You could have the other house—the bailiff’s house; it isn’t too bad. We don’t want a bailiff or agent if part of the property is sold. . . . The house isn’t so bad.”

“Details come later,” said Robert.

“Not so much later! Of course, neither of us might want to live here. . . .”

Newland got up. “Diana, show me the garden, and give me some of your plans to take home.”

She looked round the table.

“Wouldn’t you girls like to come?”

Lady Watmer spoke for them both. “I think we’d better stay and hear what more Charles has to say, Mother dear.” She was very affectionate and sweet; and Diana’s face lighted at her smiling smile.

“What about you, Clare? Do you want to stay?”

“If the others are going to say anything, Mother, I think we’d like to stay and hear it.”

“And Bernard, please,” said Lady Watmer.

The sisters drew close together to hear the men, as Newland took Diana gently from the room where discussion of her future would take place—perhaps acrimoniously. She herself knew that it must be to a degree contentious; and this contention was the only fresh grief in her heart

now that Charlie was dead. Going out with Newland she thanked God silently for air and peace and sun ; and the great love that had been.

"The garden has never looked better nor more promising," Newland said. "Your daffodils were remarkable; I heard. The roses promise well too."

"Yes, Morris."

He looked at her quickly.

"It's best to keep out of the way—though I must stay to hear the decisions, if they can arrive at them this afternoon."

"They may be able to finish this afternoon. You know, Morris, I have sometimes thought of this day. Had I gone first——"

"You !"

"Well, I'm nearly fifty-six. Charles is thirty-five, Robert thirty-four. The girls—Marion is the elder—she's thirty-three. Clare is next—thirty-two. Then there are my lost ones—Irene is nearly twenty-eight. Bertie . . . is—is—thirty-six. . . ."

"Since you never speak of him, I don't ; but . . ."

"Bertie was the first. Tomorrow is his birthday. Now I shall make it a festival like the others. . . . Charlie wouldn't have that. He never forgave him—nor Irene." She paused, musing. "Charles the second is marvellously like Charles the first in character. Not in appearance. . . ."

"I never knew exactly what was Irerers' crime?" he said attentively.

She laughed—but sadly. "Her crime was just complete rebellion. She knew what she wanted—I always said that : but she set about getting it in her own way. Her father hated the friends she chose—the life she started to lead, very early for a girl of ours. It was pure young rebellion. At eighteen she got a job with out our knowledge—modelling clothes. When she² paid the train fare up to London, she couldn't pay the fare back—so she stayed . . .

till we fetched her. . . . She got a job at the same time sitting for an artist in London. Her father said it wasn't selling a talent ; it was selling her face and figure. 'Herself, a sacred property,' he said."

They were pacing up and down a lawn now—she and Morris ; there was a big magnolia still in blossom ; and trees of fragile blue jacaranda flowers ; a long wide herbaceous border showed wallflowers, forget-me-nots ; dozens of other late spring-flowering plants. The first hollyhocks were already rising high and promising.

This garden was soon to be hers no longer. . . .

"Didn't her father forbid her?"

"He did. But she used to slip away before she rebelled utterly. She wasn't nineteen when she got the modelling job. We never knew where she went or when. She'd just vanish. It was exasperating and worrying for him—he was afraid for her. Too afraid. And he was right about her friends, I'm sure. Only everyone has to choose their own friends—they can't really be chosen for us."

"That's very true."

"One can only try to put one's girls among the nice people they're likely to like and hope for the best. . . . I suppose that even in our youth those words and that technique were old-fashioned."

He listened closely.

"I know! Charlie kept me very old-fashioned," she said. "I think it's Charlie—and not just my own laziness in liking to please him, whatever it was about. Morris, now I know it isn't good for a man always to have someone pleasing him."

"It's nice ; but unhealthy."

"By the way, Marie wants me to go back to London with her tomorrow for a few days. Very quietly, you know."

"I'd advise you to go. It will make decisions easier here." And he thought: "They can finish haggling over

the furniture and the last small things while she's away."

"Marion thinks it is all right for me to go to the theatre with them now . . . now that it's all over. They are going tomorrow to see that American actress . . . everyone's raving about her, Marion says."

"Yes. Go to the theatre." He stood to look round about him, over the garden which she had planned with love. "Do you want to live here enough to make a stand?"

She was surprised. "No. Charles is the head of the family now. If he wants it . . . and I think he does . . . he will live here with his wife. They are pensioning the old bailiff off, I daresay. Robert can have that house. Robert will marry too. Perhaps they'll run the home-farm between them. Charles will see to the Shorthorns; and Robert will look after the arable land. We make a lot of money with seed. . . . But . . . but I don't know."

"I suppose those two weddings will come along pretty quickly now?"

She answered very quietly: "Yes. What a difference this . . . this . . . will make to them. We knew about Charles. Their father liked Robert's girl's people, but not Charles's girl's mother. It won't matter now."

"You will pick out what furniture—and so on—that you want?"

"I shall have to see what the brides think."

"Well," he said carefully, "everything is at your disposal."

He had not expected her to relinquish so much so easily. She was a woman with a naturally strong will and a strong mind.

Life had trained her.

"When you have lost the thing you have loved best, the rest is easy to lose."

"Of course you mean Irene," he said.

"Yes. Charlie actually destroyed her photographs after she left us. I have only one secret one. He went to the photographers and actually bought the plates to destroy. . . . He was very thorough. And after that he was more of a lover again than a settled husband. . . . I suppose, in fact, he always was like that. I went everywhere with him, you know."

"I have heard women envy you."

She did not answer; only smiled, and without bitterness.

"Well," he said, "I hope you'll have a nice visit, and a rest, with Lady Watmer. I saw something or other in the papers about her husband."

"Oh yes. There's often something about him in the papers, and do you know he really is almost as important and clever as she thinks he is!"

"So long as you have a nice time . . ."

"My daughter is so kind; and her house is so comfortable. . . ."

"How long will you be away?"

"One week."

As before, he wondered how her mind worked. Was her gentle sarcasm intended or unconscious? He had known more of the missing son than of the missing daughter. Well, old Charlie had always been a dominant, pig-headed man—so everyone had told him—ruling his own family benevolently unless they strained his benevolence; but if ~~she~~ resisted, then with a rod of iron. So people had said. He had been this woman of two children. . . .

As if she knew his thoughts she said: "I could do nothing with him when his mind was made up against our son; my Bertie. 'Leave me to come round—if I'm coming round,' he said to me three times in our married life. Twice it was about the children. With Irene he might have come round. . . . But she went away. With Bertie the trouble between them grew so bitter he would never have given way."

"But now?"

"I can go to find the lost ones with my own money in my own pocket."

"Ah yes. I can see about the money; that must be the first necessity."

"Money! Money! Money! I have never had any of my own."

"Women care so much?"

"A little money in a woman's pocket. . . . Money of her own! My father had only his retired Army pay. . . . My mother had a reversion of a little money under a relative's will. It went elsewhere when she died. I had just begun to earn my own living when Charles found me. . . ." And she said with bated breath at the memory: "How wonderful he was!"

"Well," he said. "After your generosity your sons will see you well provided now. What I mean is that, acting for you if you give me a free hand, I shall come to satisfactory conclusions with them."

They were walking past her herbaceous border. She stopped; stood, he beside her. "This year it was going to be my best ever."

He said: "Even if you have to build and leave, it is better to have built."

"Oh! I know it! But a daughter-in-law——"

"She'll have her own dreams."

"Probably better than mine."

"Well, why not? We've all got to take a beating some time."

"I shall love to see what she makes of this border," she said. "Also please understand I was not unhappy with my Charles. We were radiantly happy as husband and wife. . . . Only in marriage that is not all."

"No."

"However, I am grateful for my happiness with him."

They walked, towards the house. "We shan't be

discussing anything more today, I imagine," he said. "I'll just say goodbye to your family and then I'll go."

"I'm glad we have you, Morris."

"Thank you, my friend."

What a dear woman she was, he thought as he walked away. And he thought more; as he had done for some years.

She went into the house to pour out tea. Tea just as usual—with the addition of the family. She went into the drawing-room, and sat before the low table by the light wood fire, and they all wandered in, one by one, except for Marion who was already there.

The familiar touch of the china. . . . "I'll take this tea-set with me if you all agree. For years I've been used to it," Diana said.

"Of course, dear," said Lady Watmer quickly; as if shocked at any doubt about the tea-set, which had been in the family for three generations before her.

Charles thought: "My wife might like it," but he echoed "Of course!"

In his mind was the knowledge that the entail had ended with his father and that his mother was making gifts. "It is all yours," he said, without saying "Mother", or any expression. He had been articled—on leaving his public school—with a first-class legal firm, related to the Wycombes—in London. And very well—after his war service—he had done there; but always the thought of this big farm, and the other farms and this lovely house, came first with him.

Robert also . . . he felt he had the land in his blood; but very creditably he had acquitted himself with an eminent firm of London accountants. After the war he returned to them.

"I don't say I shall leave the firm," he said now to his listeners, not addressing himself especially to his mother, "but Charles and I might keep the bailiff and he can live in those two old cottages—we'll do 'em up—if Mother wants his house."

All turned to her, though not bodily. She felt their inquiry.

"It should be what Mother wants," said Lady Watmer, secure in her own husband's wealth.

"Of course," said Leonard Paters, and his wife echoed : "Of course."

"And I," said Robert, "may not give up accountancy, but my wife might like to live down here ; though she's a London girl ; the bailiff would do all right, if Charles wants to be in London half his time too."

"I didn't say that. We'll think about it all."

The brothers nodded agreement with each other.

She felt she was watching a play—her own children the actors ; she merely an audience. . .

"And what portion exactly is your mother to have ?" That was Sir Bernard—as usual taking hold of things in no inexperienced grasp.

"Eight hundred a year ?" That was Robert.

"Nine hundred," said Charles.

"Make it a clear thousand—free of income-tax," said Sir Bernard. "After all, it is really all hers. . ."

"My mother doesn't want to discuss all that any more now."

"No," she said, finding her hand shaking as she poured out the last cup. "If you would just tell Morris how you all decide. . ."

"You girls," said Charles, addressing both his sisters, "should be satisfied, roughly speaking, and without details, with five hundred a year apiece. And let me tell you, it cramps the land. The land wants something spent on it."

The lawyer spoke. "Your firm has the account, Charles. Your father made fifteen thousand clear last year, including his bloodstock."

"It was a damn lucky year."

"He had big expenses. A place like this incurs them," said Robert.

"Doesn't Morris's firm take care of that?" said Sir Bernard.

"Well, naturally certain items are looked after by his firm—but we all know my firm has the account actually."

"It's a family business, all of it," said Sir Bernard. "And I suggest your mother would like to be out of it all until you get a draft out—of everything."

"Thank you, Bernard," Mrs. Wycombe said, inclining her head.

"If the ladies will leave us . . . or shall we leave them?" Newland said.

They had drunk a cup of tea each, toyed with bread-and-butter. The two daughters took their mother away. "Haven't seen the garden properly," Lady Watmer murmured.

The three women sat in a stone summerhouse at the bottom of the garden, close to the stream which flowed past. "I never have had any money of my very own, you know, my dears," Mrs. Wycombe said. "I'm afraid I've said too much about money today——"

"You're being *too good*!"

"You haven't said anything. . . . A thousand and farm produce——"

"Of course, farm produce. And game. . . . Father never let his shooting here; I know Bernard has been surprised at the way he stocked his coverts. We are *all* quite well off, Mother."

So, the daughters. . . .

And presently Newland came to them, to bid adieus. "We have settled it all quite nicely, Diana; subject to your acceptance. I will go over it all with you and clinch the arrangements tomorrow. An hour at ten?"

"An hour at ten," said Mrs. Wycombe.

And suddenly she said, out of her hidden mind: "I wish I had a sister. It would be nice now. . . . I was an only child, of course, as you all know."

"I am your brother for all business purposes," Newland said. "Remember, your brother."

"What a *too* nice man to stay a bachelor!" Marion said, watching his retreating back.

"It is too soon even to say it, Mother," said Clare. "But then we don't meet often. . . ."

"Often now," said Marion. "As often as she likes. What were you going to say?"

"It's premature. If Mother would marry *him*."

The back was not out of sight.

"I shall never marry again," Diana said, shocked; hurt.

"You'll stay with us a lot, Mother?" Both daughters said this quickly.

"I have something to do," Diana said quietly. "I think it may take me a long time."

Then they saw the other men coming out of the house to them.

"Settled till Morris gets going; he's promised not to be long," Charles said, reaching them. "Robert and I are driving back to Town tonight, Mother, if there's nothing we can do. You'll have Marion and Bernard left."

"Leonard and I will be going," said Clare.

"Mother's coming up with us tomorrow," Marion Watmer said.

"So that's that," Charles nodded, satisfied; relieved. "Lunch with me in Town, Mother. Day after tomorrow. My club?"

Robert was more hesitant; though, she knew, not less keen to clinch arrangements. Robert all over! She knew him! She knew him—little as he guessed it. He only muttered something; with confusion.

"That will be charming for me, dear," she smiled.

The men went, with Clare, the butler hustling with bags. Clare turned back to wave till they were out of sight; Diana heard the cars starting up, and leaving, like a prelude to her new destiny.

The Watmers were very tender with her all that evening ; prescribing early bed. Early, then, she closed herself in her lonely room. Always they had slept together—but now he had gone forever. It was a great word. . . . Forever. Forever.

But she was devout ; obedient to the teaching of her youth. They would meet again. Only, remembering what she had said to her daughters, she fell asleep, thinking and dreaming: *I have something to do. It may take me a long time.*

Chapter 2

BERNARD had caught an early train to Town, leaving his wife with the car for her mother. “ We needn’t hurry away, dear,” Marion said. But something in Mrs. Wycombe fretted at her, telling her that not here would she ever find what she sought ; the sooner she got away, the better for her quest.

“ I’d like to start as early as *you* like, dear,” she said. “ Morris and I have finished our talk. . . . ”

Translating her quiet words rightly, Lady Watmer ordered the car at once. They had been chauffeur-driven on this serious family business. They started at twelve o’clock ; and Lady Watmer gave her mother lunch on the way, at a pleasant place, where she was known.

They came to Hampstead in time for four o’clock tea.

Marion was relieved at her mother’s calm acceptance of her future as arranged for her by her children. She herself meant to see much of her as time went by. She would help to settle her down again ; do her full duty by the most exacting standards. Her mother was very quiet but cheerful, now that she was away from the house of sorrow ; and the

churchyard—Charlie had been the last sort of man to wish for cremation. . . .

Now they came into the big lounge—drawing-room as Diana would have called it, of course. And Marion was glad that she had ordered a lavish arrangement of flowers. The place was sweet with late lilac.

“Would you like tea in your room, dear?”

“I would like to have it with you, dear. How charming your room is!”

Marion rang the bell. “Tea now, please, Jeannette.”

They sat down. And now Diana did not feel tired any more, as she had felt at the family conclave yesterday; at the funeral. She was already on her quest; seeking the world for the lost ones. Long days, months, even years perhaps; but in the end they would be reunited. Tea came and she looked as if she enjoyed it; and the tiny hot scones; but soon she longed for the solitude of her room.

Lady Watmer was quiet and clever. They talked not at all of the funeral and division of the estate; but of the future. Then: “Now you’d like to go to your room, darling?” Marion said. “Or children first?”

“Children first, please,” said the grandmother.

So the fine, dear little children came in—boy and girl, of course, just like Marion and Bernard—Marion would always do things correctly—and they had been coached in their parts. Both were quiet though happy; and neither asked for Grandpa. Indeed, Grandpa had been more visionary than real, although both had been acquainted with him in the flesh. Both had sensed inarticulately that he was absorbed with Grandma; and that they were interlopers; as, indeed, were all others.

“Now,” said Marion, dismissing them. “I’ll come up in a few minutes, dears.”

The children went to their playroom; and Marion took her mother upstairs. Someone had already unpacked the

suitcase ; laid the soft black dinner gown out on the bed ; with the ermine cape. " Lie down awhile, dear," said Marion, arming Diana to the couch by the electric fire. Obediently she lay down.

" Dinner at seven-thirty, dear," said Marion tenderly ; and left her.

" I belong nowhere," Diana thought for the first five minutes. But then she tried to think that she belonged in several pleasant places and that this was not always the lot of widows. . . . She closed her eyes. What did she see behind closed lids ? Two young sprites, girl and colt, wafting through morning mist, lighter than the mist ; flashing through ; then gone. Gone ; except for the eternal reappearances in her mother's dreaming eyes. And, connected with the vision, she thought : " I will get Miss Rivers to come back to me in my new house."

Marion's maid came in to turn on her bath ; and Diana watched her. Marion managed to have and keep good maids—the clever girl !

" I will come back to do up your gown, madam," said the maid. And softly she went out. " Yes," Diana could think, " so much has gone right for my daughters and my sons . . . I should thank God." And so she had thanked God—praying also for what she pined for most in the world, and had long lost.

" When Rivers is back with me," she thought, taking for granted that the former governess would come, " we shall talk it all over ; and together we shall find . . ."

The maid returned. So short a time since she had bathed ; and laid down again to rest. . . . " I've slept," she thought. And then she was dressed and ready, with her diamond bracelets on ; her pearls round her throat ; and going down to the lounge again. And only one thing momentarily mattered ; this house, this happiness of married people in it.

Charlie's gifts of pearls and diamonds—given to assuage

a tortured heart—did not matter ; she sorrowed for Charlie ; yet the new life already pulsed through her veins.

So that, when she came into the lounge, she looked almost gay ; she did not mourn ; because now she could go alone for what she sought.

Bernard came forward and spoke tenderly ; putting her into a chair. He gave her sherry very pale and fine ; Charlie had trained her palate ; and now she remembered afresh how happily he would bring her sherry every night ; and together they would await dinner.

She raised her glass. " This is the same sherry," she began.

" Yes," said Bernard gently. " He gave me ten dozen. God bless him."

They all raised their glasses. It came naturally, setting the rhythm of the future. There was no solemn silence ; nothing else said about Charlie. The diamond bracelets twinkled on her wrists.

" My last birthday," she said calmly, holding them out. " This one." She even smiled proudly at the gifts. She looked up to the beholders with a smile. " The diamonds, I mean. The pearls were when Irene was born. To wear when he took me away."

The name had been spoken. *Irene ! Irene !* A silence. She raised her glass. " To the memory," she said. Two glasses were lifted in unison with hers.

" How nice Mazion's food is," she thought, tasting nothing that she ate. " How good my girls are ! "

" I'm looking forward to tonight," Bernard said, addressing her. " We've been to a spate of dismal first nights lately ; this is said to be an interesting show. The Americans always seem to have a lot of that pep, anyway ! "

" The last show I saw," Diana answered, " was on my wedding anniversary three years ago "—already she had said " I " instead of " we ". " It was wonderful."

Yes. Wonderful. A romantic musical. And Charlie had made love to her afterwards as if they were bride and

bridegroom ; boy and girl. Marion and Bernard would not believe that.

It was so sane, so sensible, to go to the theatre tonight.

The car drew up outside the theatre, moving slowly through the mobs. People were pouring in. Anticipation ran high. Smart gowns, furs and jewels, decorated the foyer ; moving like a resistless stream to their appointed places. Diana Wycombe could not take in detail ; her mind was too weary with its endless quest. Her mind did not appreciate nor care. But she must alter that ! She must live in compartments—two for Marion and Clare ; two for Charles and Robert . . . a whole palace in her mind for the lost ones.

“ Quite a long time since I was at a real first night,” she murmured to Marion. “ My birthday in nineteen thirty-nine was the last time . . . before the war. Father took me.”

Yes. Charlie had taken her for three days to London ; her birthday was his alone ; the other days they had shopped, gone to the Horse Show—and she had visited the family. They were always bride and bridegroom again on her birthday.

Of the other birthdays she always had to remind him. . . .

The crowd at the entrance and the crowd at the stage door round the corner were quiet, jostling to get in to their seats.

“ This is rather a great evening,” said Marion, taking her hand from her mother’s. “ It will be a full house. Look ! People are being turned away from the box office. But we got our box a fortnight ago.”

Before Charles died ? Yes. Of course the family proceeded without him. Of course. . . . “ Of course,” she murmured aloud.

Her son-in-law helped her out. The three of them went into the crowded foyer.

He felt for her. The renunciation which she had made after the will had been read had touched his heart.

He settled his mother-in-law with special care therefore ; there had been, it seemed to him, something great about her quick undeviating renunciation of her properties ; a brilliance of decision, a certainty, that caught the imagination. No hesitations—she had pronounced at once what she thought fair divisions. She had taken her own hands off the property ; except for the sum which they had suggested as her portion.

A grand-looking woman, he thought with a quick glance at her in her filmy black. Rather tall ; very fair ; a brave face which had not lost its beauty so much as exchanged it for maturity. He hoped she would put her memories and present concerns out of her mind. . . .

The play was called THE GREAT DESIRE.

She watched the stalls filling ; the people poured into the pit, the gallery ; the circles were full ; she glanced up and saw heads of people standing at the back of the upper circle and the gallery and up the main aisles. Expectation ran high and could be felt.

“ Clare has quite a party in the stalls,” said Marion, looking over. “ She didn’t mention it.”

The widow felt curiously glad to be one of them—with Marion and her husband up here ; Clare and her husband and party below.

Bernard was looking down too—for acquaintances. “ Not a seat in the house to be had,” he said. “ They’re turning scores away.”

He was gratified. “ Marion and I always do the first nights if we can,” he said comfortably.

And he pointed out to her the leading critics, some noted beauties, this and that well-known actress, who was but a name to her. And as she followed his direction, she saw a man’s fair head. Among all the other fair heads only this one focused her eyes. Her eyes would not turn away ; would not travel on. “ Who . . . who . . . is that ? ” she asked in a strange voice. “ Beside that grey-haired man in the second row, the two end seats. . . . ”

Bernard looked down.

"Don't know. But the chap with grey hair—he's the principal backer. Follett. In a lot of the successful plays. He was lunching at my club with a member the other day. Been in Town all through rehearsals, I was told. Fellow I was with said his judgment is considered solid. Never backed a loser yet."

"It's the other. . . ."

"Bernard will go out at the interval and find out, won't you, darling?" Marion said. "You won't want to go out and meet people, Mother?"

"I . . . I would rather not, dear."

"Of course, of course," said Bernard feelingly. "I'll bring anyone along if I think you'd like them. But you just stay quietly up here with Marion."

"Did you have jewels for all of us, Mother?" Marion asked.

She was watching her mother's face, because somehow the jewels and their cause surprised her. Bernard had given herself wonderful gifts for each of their two. But Mother had never mentioned . . .

"Yes; or something else. . . . My chinchilla cape for Robert; and my sables for you; and . . . oh——" She broke off.

"Curtain up!" said Bernard quietly.

The curtain rose on a setting of such stark beauty that the applause came for the empty stage. Expectation ran high.

Then the star walked across the stage, to disappear on the other side through a great door which she slammed—but not before the applause rose, and rose till it was one long roar. A minor player followed her, and the applause sank. Silence. She returned. And all at once Mrs. Wycombe discovered—after that trembling moment—that she had not opened her programme and that she could not remember if Bernard had told her the actress's name. She opened her programme hurriedly; Frances Falaise.

Frances Falaise.

"Isn't she lovely?" Marion murmured.

Could they not see?

She gasped; and caught her breath; and let it out in a long sigh.

Now Frances Falaise began to act. She began an exquisite performance which was to keep her on the stage without an exit till the end of the act. The play was American tragedy-comedy; heights and depths; laughter and passion. Tragedy made by circumstances; humour from the brilliance of the actress's reactions. The curtain fell; and rose to the applause; fell again. Rose and fell. . . .

Mrs. Wycombe sat trembling; hands palsied. But Marion laid her own hands on them as her mother folded them limply in her lap.

"Wonderful, wasn't it? What a mastery she has!"

"Marion!"

"Yes, dear?"

"Don't you see—isn't she extraordinarily like Irene?"

"Irene? Darling, no. Fair hair—that's all the resemblance."

"I hear this is the longest interval," Bernard said, and left the box. He hadn't heard. "I'll see if I can get you girls"—he smiled affectionately at his mother-in-law—"a peep at the Falaise in her dressing-room. She's changing between the next two acts, I'm told. Not this. Come on."

One of his acquaintances—Sir George Salsay—waited for them. "We are extraordinarily privileged," he said, greeting Marion. "I've worked it with Follett."

"I've never been behind before," Diana murmured as they hurried down ways strange to her. But Marion seemed quite at home. A guarded door faced them. "I'll see," said the uniformed call-boy in front of it. Then a moment --and they were in.

The star sat before her mirror but turned from it; for she

had no change to make between this act and the next. Close to her stood the grey-haired man, Follett. The young man, who had sat with him loitered about, looking at the wealth of flowers which banked one side, and which kept coming.

The fair face wavered before Diana's eyes. It changed. . . . It was the face of a new-born baby—her youngest. . . . The dressing-room seemed to dissolve, and time stepped back ; and she had in her arms—for such a brief moment—the baby that was going to be her last. The doctor knew it ; the nurse knew it. The patient was very ill. But she was not too ill to think ; to hope ; to utter a faint incoherent protest that this time she should feed the baby.

This time—oh, surely they would let her have the baby for her own.

She sought for words, and they came in distraught whispers : “ This time, remember, doctor, I am going to feed Baby. The last—let me feed her.” The door opened and Charlie came softly, fearfully, yet dominantly, in. The doctor took his arm and led him out for a brief time. The doctor came back alone ; after some minutes.

She was gazing at him with distended eyes. He sat beside her and laid a finger on her pulse. “ This time,” he said gently, “ it is quite impossible, dear. You could not be allowed to do it. . . . Remember your other children,” he said softly. “ You don't want to exhaust yourself and also do more harm than good to the baby. We have to be prudent, dear. . . .”

He was an old man, a notable gynaecologist in the county ; he had delivered all her children. They knew each other. In fact they knew each other, at this moment, completely. “ We must think wisely,” he had said.

“ You must not upset yourself. The baby will be as well without you as with you. And I do not think you could do it for long. Better start the dear little girl as

we mean to go on. I want you to have complete rest and quiet. . . .”

Here, she thought, she had shut her ears ; but later was told she had fainted. The world sank away. She was very ill indeed ; and the doctor was with her two or three times a day. The familiar feeling of her bound breasts, and the taste of the medicine they always gave her to take the milk away, never left her. And then she was better ; and had capitulated as before ; and opened her eyes from a half-doze to see the nurse beside her—the second nurse, for there were two by now—with the placid infant in her arms, taking its feed from the bottle.

“ Look, my dear,” said Nurse. “ Look how well she has got on, with no interruptions. Aren’t you satisfied now ? ”

Who could be satisfied now ? But she had capitulated. It was too late.

Charlie had come in at a chosen time. He had brought with him his gift—he always gave her something lovely for these times. But this time he had been advised to hold it back till bidden. He was very quiet and dogged still ; but strangely nervous ; as he clasped round her neck the most beautiful necklace she had ever seen. “ This . . . this . . . is for the end,” he stammered.

Yes. The end.

She had looked at him.

Once before in their married life she had seen Charlie like this—but forgot it again when he loved her again. She knew that a sixth honeymoon would follow ; and that he would make her forget. For he was the prince of lovers.

The child flourished.

They went to Capri.

It was gay and beautiful ; they sunbathed ; and swam, Charlie timing her activities anxiously. She was again a beautiful adored woman in the sunshine. . . . But where

would she ever find the matchless beauty—the quiet and God-given beauty—the priceless secrets of maternity—which she had missed ?

She must return her mind to the dressing-room, where her youngest sat before the great mirror, lovely beyond dreams ; Frances Falaise. No ! No ! Irene ! Irene ! . . . A man was speaking ; Sir George Salsay, who knew Bertie too. And he presented the visitors to the star . . . who received them modestly and graciously. And as Diana looked at her she looked back—to a stranger. She said what was the automatic thing to say ; that she hoped they would enjoy the play. . . . Oh, Mrs. Wycombe was up from the country, was she ? The English countryside—she would have a Sunday or two motoring about here and there. Perhaps she would learn a little about the beauties of England if the play ran. . . . The older man, Follett, stood beside Diana, looking at the star contemplatively in the mirror.

“ It will run,” he said.

“ Four companies out in America, previous to the New York opening,” he added to the guests, and smiled. “ Pity Miss Falaise cannot tour here ; but I doubt if London will give her up so easily. And we want her back.”

Then everyone said this and that ; appropriate things ; compliments ; the star had replied, radiant, witty. From her Diana looked to the young man, and he came to stand beside her ; and look down, listening and making comments. Diana felt herself saying foolish things ; inept. “ Are you in the theatre—yourself ? ” she finally heard herself asking, looking and looking. “ I know so little of what goes on outside my own small world,” she said.

“ Perhaps your own small world is a very pleasant place ”—there rose instantly before her eyes the long dining-room table at home and the family seated round

it ; and the chill wind, which she had physically felt then, seemed to blow about her here too. " I suppose it is," she murmured uncertainly. Looking at him—looking, looking—her mind, her heart were saying that this was Bertie ; this able man out of another world ; this baby, this boy—this stranger with his own life, his own concerns, far removed from her. While her mind thus confused itself, he was answering her enquiry as to whether he were also in the theatre : " No. I have other affairs ; but I take a great interest in the theatre."

" I see." She seemed to know then, at once, that he also was a success ; long out of her world ; never returning to it.

Was it possible that Bertie did not know her ? Had not said to himself : " Here's Mother " ?

" You are English surely," she said timidly ; uncertainly.

" No. I'm an American. ' This is a business ' visit to England."

A bell rang somewhere, closer ; farther ; closer again. It caused a small stir in the dressing-room. Frances Falaise made a gesture. " So nice of you to come." The acquaintance of Bernard's who had brought them in indicated a quick exit. Marion put her arm through her mother's.

" It has been sweet of you, Miss Falaise," Marion was hurrying. " A treat for my mother—and for me. Thank you so much. . . ."

The men made their salaams. The star was left with Follett and the younger man. The door closed against visitors.

" What luck ! " said Bernard, hurrying his women away, followed by the acquaintance whom he had introduced. " I'm awfully obliged, Salsay . . . interesting to get behind and meet her. Lovely thing. . . ."

Hurry ; hurry ; and back to the shelter of the box. Diana leaned back in her seat and for a moment closed her eyes. Lady Watmer's hand touched hers. She opened her eyes to

see her daughter's wary face. They were suspecting her of fancies? Had Marion also thought . . .? "I'm quite dazzled," she said with a smile.

"So long as you aren't tired. . . ."

What did they think of a woman still in the middle fifties who had seldom had any illness save for the babies? With Charlie she had felt young; he had kept her so.

"Tired? . . . No, dear."

The curtain rose. Everyone in the big theatre—she could feel it, in spite of her inexperience in such matters—rose in mind to it. And there she was—Irene—no; Frances Falaise—standing at the back of the stage, facing out to a garden with a vista—how clever!

Her very slender back was topped by the heavy knot of her pale hair. And Diana glanced at Bertie down below in his stall and said to herself almost unconsciously: "I'm glad they are together often. . . ."

The play rose; in each act it lifted to a climax which had the audience forward in its seats; its concerted mind gasping. "No doubt about this play," Bernard said as the final curtain dropped; only to be raised again; with everyone in the audience on their feet; cheering. Not just clapping, not just "Bravos". Cheering . . . and secretly Diana took all these tributes to her heart.

Tributes for Irene: . . . Her heart lifted with pride. Yet she must not say, even to herself, that this was a certainty. A certainty would be like a miracle; a long, long prayer answered.

"You'd like to come on for supper, dear," Marion was saying, putting her arm through her mother's. "Or shall we take you home?"

The choice was hers. "I'd like to go on for supper . . . if . . . I mean, where are we going?"

"Sir George has a table at the Ritz—that's where Frances Falaise is going; and Follett; and that fair chap who came into the dressing room," Bernard said.

"I don't want to keep you from going to supper on this—this—interesting night, Marion. The chauffeur could drive me home and come back to the Ritz for you, couldn't he, dear? But . . . if Bernard thinks it isn't wrong of me to come with you——"

"Of course he doesn't. He thinks you should come. Unless you'd rather not. . . ."

For the first time since Charlie's death Mrs. Wycombe laughed.

"I would like to come."

"The Ritz is quiet. . . ."

"Yes, dear? He and I always went to the Carlton."

"Then I think you'd better come, dear, for a change."

She left herself in hands other than her own. There was the car, taking its turn in an endless-seeming procession of cars; at the front entrance of the theatre. She got in first; then Marion; she noticed vaguely that Sir George Salsay came too. He had told his chauffeur to come for him at the Ritz in an hour's time.

A supper party; yet Charlie had been buried only yesterday. . . .

Diana acted mechanically; chiefly memorising Frances Falaise and the tall fair man who accompanied Follott. Well, she had part of a lifetime's obedience to unspoken commands behind her; and she was just following; following. . . .

She sat beside Marion, whose hand held hers again. Kind Marion.

"Queer idea of yours, dear," Marion was murmuring into her ear. "She isn't like Irene at all."

"Like Irene might be *now*. . . ." she heard her own voice whispering back. "And—and like Bertie."

"No, dear. Bertie was always so pale and aloof . . . wasn't he? He irritated Father. Sorry, dear; I shouldn't have said that. Well, he cut loose, didn't he? But, darling, this man's a tough. You ask Bernard for his opinion; he's

tough. Mother, you mustn't always hanker after them ; you may be sure they aren't hankering after you ; or any of us."

Diana said : " I've been thinking of asking Miss Rivers to make her home with me ; do the housekeeping and—oh, there'll be many ways I can find her useful. What do you think ? "

" A very good idea. I'd like to see old Rivers again."

The car drew up at the Ritz, one of the earliest of a stream of cars from the theatre. They got out. The host being now Sir George Salsay he ushered them in, where the *major domo* took charge. As she moved beside her mother into the big restaurant Marion said : " Miss Falsie and her party will come just a little late, you'll see. You'll be able to have a good look at them all again, dear."

" Will Mr. Follett be with them ? "

" She's guessed that," Marion thought. " Well, dear, he's a big theatrical backer. It will be his party, I've no doubt."

" I see."

" Will you sit here, Diana ? " said Bernard. " I will call her Diana," he thought. She took the chair the head waiter was drawing out. The quiet accumulating movement of the restaurant fascinated her, as party after party came in. Sir George had ordered supper and now asked for personal corrections ; there were none. He was faultless always in his hospitality.

Diana had seldom known such an occasion. When she and Charlie had come to Town for the Horse Show, the Motor Show, the Naval and Military Tournament, or a few days of theatres and some dancing, they always got a corner table ; and were alone because he had been an untiring and jealous lover. They had looked out from their corner in the Carlton restaurant ; aloof from the world about them. Surreptitiously, often, at their quiet table, as she had looked

about her, she had wondered if, by and by, she and he would bring their older children. . . .

"Fifty-six," she thought now. "I'm nearly fifty-six."

Ah, but Charlie would not have tired.

Now they were all talking about the play.

Also they talked of the cast ; primarily of the star.

"She was Follett's find," Sir George said. "He set her up. Fellow never makes a mistake. They'll be along presently. He's losing money, I daresay, by not letting her tour in the States ; but of course there's the prestige of a London show. Daresay she'd want that."

"And he'd give her what she wants." It was Bernard who said that casually, but with a smile.

"I suppose that's taken for granted," said Sir George.

The smile passed round the table. Good-natured. Admiring.

Diana smiled hazily too ; only slowly comprehending what the inference was.

She had remained curiously uncomprehending throughout life, and regretted it now. Her heart took slow alarm—for Irene. For Frances Falaise.

"He met her—so it goes—when she was doing some kind of stunt in New York," added Sir George. "But that's just a rumour. Publicity, I daresay."

"We saw them once in Brittany, getting a good tan," said Bernard to Marion, "didn't we, my dear ? One time when we took the kids over ?"

"Yes. I thought there was something familiar. I'm sure they were there. Quite quietly, weren't they, darling ? I mean, they weren't in any party ?"

"Why should they be ?" Bernard said ; adding : "They spoke to the kids."

Then quietly and suddenly he caught that look from his wife which meant the subject should be changed. "We have that sort of holiday," he said, turning to Salsay. "Only time I really get acquainted with my own kids. We fish and sail, you know ; all that."

Caviare.

It was always what Charlie had ordered when they came to Town. He was conservative. He did not adventure in these things. He ordered as if he were ordering memories, each time.

"I'd love to meet Miss Falaise again," Diana said. "I mean quietly, you know."

"So would I," Salsay chuckled. "Just Miss Falaise and myself. But one might as well wish for the moon."

"Here they are!"

Frances Falaise entered with Follett close at her elbow. The head waiter came forward quickly. They had a corner table. They were alone. All her gold curls dropped heavily to be clasped on the nape of her neck; the neck was collared with pearls which had belonged to a dead European queen. She wore a white lace gown and had dropped from her shoulders, caught by the waiter, sables.

But they were not to be alone. The fair-haired man who had sat in the stalls came in, made straight for them; Follett smiled, and he sat down, on the other side of Frances.

"I heard about that chap out in the foyer," Salsay said. "He's one of the directors of Nickel and Knight in Pennsylvania. You know the firm, Paters?"

"One of the biggest," Paters said. "Yes. One of the biggest engineering concerns in the States."

"He was educated over here, I heard; but worked his way in the firm. They say that what he doesn't know about the uses of Nickelagate isn't worth anything to anyone. It was his discovery."

"That so?" said Bernard, interested.

"He interested himself in the theatre lately. Follett lets him in. . . . So I was told. But he's over here for Nickel and Knight. I would like to get hold of him for a talk; but he's very aloof. Busy, of course."

Now the men were looking with quick professional

interest at the young man sitting with Frances Falaise and Follett. And Diana's heart stirred. It lifted. She could hardly restrain the cry : " He's my son ! " But deep in her heart was graven the memory of his going ; a rage of the father and a rage of the son—and he had gone. It was a little cause too ; such a small thing for such rages ; but all contact between father and son—tenuous at best—had ended.

She remembered here at this table, with her daughters and sons-in-law round her, Miss Rivers, the governess and confidante, trying to persuade her as she walked up and down, up and down : " Bertie will be all right, my dear."

But who had ever known, since, that Bertie was " all right " ?

" He is a man," had said Miss Rivers. " He will go his own way, and it will be a good way. Try to be quiet."

Well, now she knew. Or did she ?

But Bernard and Paters would never have believed her ; and that young man over there, with the tall fair head—he would not have accepted her either. If he were indeed Bertie he had remade his life.

" He sounds like a genius," she said in a low, vague voice.

" Yes," nodded Bernard, smiling.

" My eldest son, Bertie," she said clearly to the whole table, looking round them, " was very keen on engineering. In the holidays he would hang round the engineering works—only five miles off ; and they let him tinker about quite a lot. They let him fit up a workshop for himself. I knew ; but no one else knew. And he never knew that I did. His father intended him to replace the agent on the estate when necessary. He had wanted him to learn practical farming. He was to take a farming degree. . . . The war came. . . . And then . . . we never quite knew. . . ."

They were all listening to her. She was conscious that it was not very interesting to Sir George, nor to Bernard ; nor very acceptable to her daughter. She was a mother—

who had lost two children—though not to death ; not irrevocably, so it must always seem to her—and her wishes fathered her thoughts, and she had spoken slowly and equably ; and dropped into sudden silence.

Bernard's eyes sent a quiet message to Sir George, who read it for what it was intended to be. But she had said the words. In the midst of them she had, not kept the silence. She felt relief. There was the interruption of their waiter deftly moving plates and serving the next course of the delicate supper. The champagne foamed into the glasses again. " Well, drink to the absent," said Bernard, raising his glass ; suddenly feeling his heart stir for his mother-in-law. They all drank in silence. " Pity Clare and Lettie couldn't come with us," he said. " But they had quite a party ; and we're enough for you, Mother, tonight."

The first time he had called her " Mother " ! It was for Marion—for he had a mother alive still. " He is good," Diana thought. " Good."

Grandchildren too ; she had those.

" How kind you all are to me ! " she said.

At the table in the corner Frances Falaise made a good supper. Follett sat at her right hand, more than devoted ; eyes for no one but her. He knew himself besotted—as she did—and his eyes were on her tiniest movement ; on her small, long, slender hands ; her transparent beauty. They had had a resounding success ; both knew it. There was such a happening as an apparently successful first night ; the full auditorium ; the people turned away ; the applause ; the enthusiasm, the congratulations . . . and then the papers damning with faint praise the next morning ; the sudden dwindling of acclaim. This was not that. They had won. Now, as before in other plays in New York, at preliminary canters in Buffalo, in Chicago, they had mused together on the incalculable ; on the mood of people ; on the weather

of the theatre ; but this London *début* was the real thing. Great bookings had been made for far into the future. Internationally the play was engaged for an uncharted time. Options extended into the far future. . . . Transatlantic calls had been sent carrying optional film offers for very large sums. Here were he and she now alone as he liked it to be ; as they seldom were ; although she was his. Next Saturday night, after the performance, a specially chartered 'plane would fly them to France for the week-end. A specially chartered 'plane would bring them back. These journeys could be quite secret to them alone, with luck. He wished he could translate her thoughts. "Nuisance for you to see those people," he said. "No one one knew—or knew of, except George Salsay. You shouldn't have done it."

"It took only a moment," she said.

"A moment is too long when you are going to act in London for the first time." Then he told her of the Saturday-night arrangements. Falaise hadn't stayed with them ; he had moved off on affairs of his own.

"In Paris you can rest at the flat. We'll drive out to the country for *déjeuner*. . . ."

"Yes. It would be more amusing than my hotel here. Sunday here is dull. We could ride in the Bois—or somewhere."

"We can ride at the Duc de Brunel's *château*. Fifty miles only from Fontainebleau. He's away, but I've the run of his stables and his chef will set a good table and you'll be in clover, my dearest."

"It'll be a long run."

"Yes. You'd like to see it through ?"

"We'll see. I suppose I ought to."

"You might like London for awhile, after all. After all, you won't tour. The English provinces would seem pretty small stuff to you after our big cities."

"Yes. Pretty small stuff."

"Did you have some sort of surprise—shock—when you met those people in your dressing-room?"

"Rather a surprise. I had known them before; tonight I realised how slightly."

"They meant something to you?"

"I suppose once they did."

"The middle-aged woman was just a little like you. But more like the other younger woman."

"She is her mother, I understood. Just widowed, Sir Bernard said to me . . . aside, you know. They all seemed happy. I thought . . . as much as one does think about strangers."

"Ah, yes, strangers," he said, watching her. And he thought, coming to this country—mighty in prestige, geographically so small and unimposing as he always thought—how the upper classes—who would presumably always exist—were interlocked; they were like a great network into which many families intertwined, even today. This Wycombe family hardly merited the adjective "great", but they could enter the close preserves. "There is something about them all," he thought, "that I would like to have; but never shall. They admit me charmingly, but will never be intimate." No. He had come from the back blocks of San Francisco very, very young; and never gone back. And today he stood where he stood by merit; and humility while he learned; and great learning of life; by painful pangs of hope and ambition. So that now he was where he was; a headliner in the big newspapers; a cosmopolitan figure; and, after many women, lover of Frances Falaise; maker of Frances Falaise.

"Like to go on?" he asked when he was smoking, and she had declined as she always did. She kept herself strictly. And she was the first woman who had been strict with him; making him deny himself many useless pleasures. Therefore he loved her as he had loved no other.

"No, I want to sleep."

"Quite right, darling." They rose ; made an exit that was quiet, unassuming ; but, all the same, triumphal. Men rose to toast her as she approached. There were quiet "Thank yous" and "Bravos" as they threaded through the lanes of tables to the exit. She had a far-away smile for all.

She looked shy ; her most captivating trick. Trick only—for now she did not know shyness. She looked clearly into life and saw all that was there for her.

Follett walked beside her, humble in spirit ; because he knew her strange, undeviating, unpossessable quality.

She entered the big car as though she owned it. So she could own it if she wished. But that had also interested him when he first made her acquaintance—her self-control amounting to the strongest will-power that he had ever known. She did not want his big car. He had been afraid that his will could never—if the glove were cast—meet hers and vanquish it. But for him she relaxed her will ; and made him gifts.

He was close beside her ; holding her soft elbow as she got in. "Hope your brother enjoyed the show."

"Yes. He loved it. He's here for some time."

"As I am. And let's hope—if hope is needed—as you are."

The car ran with dulcet softness. "Glad to be back in London?" he asked.

"London hasn't many happy memories for me. So—yes. I am glad. You see, I want to conquer it."

"You could never be a failure here."

"But still I want my conquest."

"Well, you have it."

They were going to the quiet smallish hotel where he stayed when in London. Frances had a suite too. He had guessed right when he had thought the place would please her. It stood across a quiet short West End street ; a *cul-de-sac*. Old-fashioned ; proud with the quiet ceremony

of ages. This was more distinguished—so Follett said to himself when, on other occasions, he had flown over to see plays—than the larger, more gilded famous palaces. The welcome was more personal ; the training of the staff had just that extra perfection which one might look for elsewhere and not find. . . . He had had a thought that it would be better maybe to put Frances there and go elsewhere himself. But there was the convenience of talking over fine points of the play ; of brief rehearsals of this or that in either flat ; more plays to read perhaps ; and long talks about them. She was seldom in his flat when he received callers ; nor was he in hers on such occasions. Eaten with jealousy, he would not be *gauche* enough to show it. He possessed the master key to all situations anyway.

Tonight on the brief drive back to the hotel, not touching her by so much as holding her hand, he knew he had the master key ; but also he knew it might not be for long. Therefore he wanted her to hear from him of future plays from the elected writers. He let her know that so long as other matters were so between them, the question of there being practically a partnership, as far as the business side was concerned, need never arise.

Some women had not been wise ; they had tired, or been seduced away ; and had repented.

And now that he grew older, all the more did he crave to tie Frances to him. Soft flexible bonds, oh yes. But they must not be breakable. So far he had kept her strictly to the letter of the contracts which he made her sign ; so far she had been as honourable as a man. As honourable as a man—and, for the business hours, treated like one—that was the way they did it. And when, like a man, she had wrested from him the terms she expected, she became the perfect mistress he wanted her to be.

Follett thought swiftly but deviously, on these aspects—without quite dissecting the reason for the thought—as they drove to their hotel. They went up to their suites on

separate floors, saying good night. The very slightest lack of further feeling in her sent him on to the higher floor. He had considered years ago how to treat sensitive, incalculable women. Never press an advantage ; never importune her ; never insist ; never reproach. He let her go ; though he had wanted her more keenly than he had wanted her for some time past—there had been the rehearsals here in London ; a trial of nerves ; and her own common sense in resting ; keeping privacy.

But he let her go ; with a good-humoured caress, light, affectionate.

He had sensed the necessity for her to close herself in alone. She had that to think of which had arisen from the meeting with the people—Sir Bernard and his party—in her dressing-room. And Follett could never remain unaware of any of her moods or reactions.

Chapter 3

BEFORE she went to bed that night Diana wanted to speak to her son-in-law. She had always liked him, and so had Charlie. Another man as capable as himself—though in different ways—a man who stood up to him and bestowed prestige on Charlie's daughter, was completely acceptable. Their meetings were not frequent. Diana and Charlie had stayed a couple of nights for the Horse Show ; and then for the Motor Show ; and, except for a Christmas visit on one or two occasions only, that was all. All, but enough to show Charlie's approbation. 'To such approbation Sir Bernard had been always wisely indifferent.

At Christmas, after the family was grown up and dispersed, Charlie had usually taken her away, elsewhere ; on their own. . . .

Some Christmas seasons, in the young years, she had acquiesced to going away with him. But Miss Rivers had been with them then ; caring for the family ; posting Christmas cards ; and pointing out to lucky girls and boys what delightful presents parents had left as surprises for them. . . .

"Some children," Miss Rivers had said more than once, reading the young faces, "have parents right away in India or somewhere else quite as far away. . . . You are lucky boys and girls."

Perhaps. But when the children were asked back—in return for those parties arranged by Miss Rivers—there had been jolly houses, fathers sharing the toboggans, co-operative mothers, aunts, cousins.

"We're always *different*," Irene had said one Christmas, Miss Rivers had reported quietly to the returning mother.

This, and much more, was clear in Diana's mind as she loitered before going up to bed, talked a little more ; till Marion, observant and sympathetic, had said good night and left her with Bernard.

Diana made the excuse of slowness in finishing her glass of hot milk, which she always drank before going to bed, for lingering. Bernard also poured himself another tot of whisky. They were both standing on the hearth. "An interesting play," he said. "Marion always picks well. But this one was something different, don't you think ?"

"Miss Falaise was different too." She raised her glass to her lips ; her hand trembled, she spilt milk on her gown ; Bernard wiped the spot away with a ready handkerchief. While it was being done very carefully they could speak without looking at each other. "Yes," he said. "Quite brilliant ; so subtle—I daresay you got it. It had some tricky moments. I mean, only her rendering carried some of the lines."

"I . . . I thought . . . if she were a daughter of mine, I wouldn't have liked her to speak them."

"I hope my daughter," said Bernard, tucking the handkerchief into his sleeve and straightening up, "will always feel she can say to me whatever she wants to say. Don't you think that's best?"

She began to agree, faltering and thinking before she spoke. He added: "I shouldn't like our daughter to think she had better friends—if it had come to some sort of show-down—than her mother and myself."

"I expect she knows that. . . ."

"I trust she does. And our boy too—he knows it."

With a man's idea of trying to put the best construction on what was done by another man, he said: "Marion told me what lovely presents your husband gave you when you had a baby. I quite wondered whether I could keep the standard up!"

He laughed good-humouredly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her face; hesitant; with a secret knowledge behind its remarkable smoothness. She began to speak; hesitated; continued: "It wasn't for the baby. . . ."

His observant look at her was no burden. He removed the look, his eyes wandering impersonally round the room. She said, with no hostility; only the bitter sadness of one who has been cheated of something precious: "It wasn't only for the baby, you know. It was for my agreeing not to nurse it."

Bernard repeated: "Agreeing?"

"Not in words, after the first time," she said. "It was just knowledge between us. . . . I didn't want the children to offend him more by their coming—and existence—than they did. I agreed . . . by doctor's advice."

"If the doctor—or doctors—advised you not to, they must have felt——"

A little motion of her hand. She refused the cheating. "They said what he wanted, of course. And it hasn't harmed the children physically—oh, not at all. It only cheated me."

"Frankly, I'd never thought——" said Bernard.

"No. People don't. But afterwards—I suppose it got a little on my brain—sometimes I would say carelessly to the sequence of nurses we had—oh, something about other patients. Most of them at one time or another, if I prompted them, told me that their experiences were that Mrs. So-and-so would have liked to feed the baby, but *he* was against it; and the doctor, of course, said . . . I don't think it is so unusual. Only I hated it happening to me. . . . All a young mother's older friends and relatives, you know, impress on her she must regain her figure; put *him* first. . . . Charlie took me away on a new honeymoon—as he used to call it—after each birth; as soon as I could get about, he took me away. . . . I've envied the mares," she said, "left months with their foals out at pasture; never minding about their figures; nor worrying how to assuage a husband's jealousy; I envied a bitch with puppies. I daresay I am a terribly maternal woman and it's all wrong."

"I wouldn't have thought—I mean from what Marion says—oh, all very sweet things about you, please believe—but I wouldn't have thought you felt like that."

"Then in some way I've been successful."

"I know you chose a jolly good person in that Miss Rivers. I've seen the old lady and like her a lot."

"I was lucky; so were the children. . . ."

"No one will ever know," she thought; feeling the most fatal of human weaknesses—the longing to be understood.

"I don't think anyone really understands anyone," she said after a moment, in which she hoped she had arranged her face to smile, to be only humorous about what she had cried out.

• Bernard smiled too; it was not that he smiled to himself—for his face was open to her; but the smile was for the mere notion that he could misunderstand his own; or for them to misunderstand his straight open way with them.

"One needs a certain amount of humility in these things," he said, discovering the fact. "One can't take life for granted."

"One certainly can't do that."

And then she smiled again and was her gracious self, though touched by her recent loss. One could see that loss in her eyes. "I think I'll go to bed ; and thank you for being patient with me, Bernard." She just touched his face with two soft fingers as she passed him ; and it was like a blessing and farewell. Well, perhaps it was best to say farewell to the moments that had just passed between them. He thought he would tell Marion, for she would like to know what her mother had said.

"Do you tell Marion all that ?" he ventured.

"Not exactly as I've told you."

He opened the door, ushering her out. "Don't keep awake. Forget it."

"It has gone," she said lightly ; from long practice ; and went too, going up the stairs, he thought, like a young woman ; straight and light.

He was moved about what she had told him ; it put a new complexion on the gadabout mother ; the Stranger in the Nursery, as Marion once referred to her. But he understood Charlie all the same.

She went to her room. All was ready for her ; one bar of the electric fire turned on ; a pleasant warmth over all ; her night things laid out, a final drink of hot milk in a Thermos flask. Fruit—fine grapes—on the rather capacious bedside table. She had no more to think about. Her children were grown and settled ; all but the lost ones. Marriage had ended. *Yes. I'll see if old Rivers wants a home.*

She didn't care about the money ; the filching of the family house. The will had been to practical intent set aside—by her desire. Price of her sons' and daughters' affection. The price was low, considering why she was paying it. She would have plenty for her needs and enjoyments. There

would be a new garden to make, and she would keep the dogs.

But the dogs were accustomed to run in larger grounds : only too often they would be found there. . . . She would buy another dog to love her alone ; intensely ; selfishly ; joyously. She would go to the Lost Dogs' Home at Battersea and pick a waif.

And suddenly : " I ! The mother of six children ! Looking for love to a lost dog ! "

There were the grandchildren ; and she should not be so foolish.

She went next morning to the West End club to which she had belonged all her married life. Charles had wished it. " Then I know where you are when I don't look after you ! "

Bernard drove her into Town with her bag. She wouldn't stay . . . a sudden decision. And they took her change of mind as normal, not pressing her. " Going to look up your cronies ? " said Bernard. " Good ! "

But she had no special friends now. However, when she entered the club she recognised the hall porter's face and he recognised hers.

Obviously he had read in the papers of Charlie's death, and he expressed respectful regret. She asked him to try, by all means known to hall porters and their like, to get her a ticket for today's *matinée* of the Falaise play, and about eleven o'clock, as she sipped coffee in the lounge, silent and withdrawn, wanting to be quiet, with the protection of a newspaper held up before her—no one recognising her so far—he came to her with report of success. A box had been handed in for resale. " Will you take the box, madam ? " Yes. She would take the box. " I will send a messenger round, madam. The play's such a success they won't keep it, though I gave the name of the club. Five guineas, madam. . . ." She took five pound notes and five shillings

unflinchingly from her handbag ; glad of the box, where she might sit far back, just looking at the stage. Looking. Looking.

It was a pity when marriage had caused one to lose touch with acquaintances. She would have liked someone to lunch with her—she could only think of Clare. But over the telephone Clare said she was playing golf with the wife of a client of Leonard's. And she wished Mother a happy day. . . . Shopping? . . . Club? . . . "You'll run into old cronies there, I expect, dear."

She had one piece of luck. Someone came into the club ; and recognised her, and shared a table for lunch. Awkwardness came when the other member said she was also going to the *matinée* of the Falaise play. . . . "I ought to say," Diana thought, "I have a box ; will you share it?" But luckily the other woman was meeting a very dear and long-lost friend.

"I'm bringing her back for dinner here," the other woman said.

"I have to collect the old friends," Diana thought ; looking about her. She saw a woman whose husband had lately received a title, and smiled at her ; receiving first a stare, then a doubtful bow in return. She was glad to be obliged to hurry for the *matinée*.

When she had sat through the first brilliant act—so much more brilliant it seemed, now that she was calmer ; no more astonished—she sent a note round to Frances Falaise's dressing-room. The attendant who took it from her looked surprised ; not to say doubtful. "It's Saturday," she said. "Miss Falaise had a very busy night in her dressing-room last night."

But she returned, still more surprised.

"Miss Falaise can see you immediately after the play, madam. Please be quite ready to come. Miss Falaise is going down to the country tonight after the evening show, and is very pressed." Frances Falaise's dresser also came to look

disapprovingly at the visitor. "Were you not here last night, madam?"

"Yes. But I want very much to see Miss Falaise again this afternoon."

"I daresay many do, madam. Miss Falaise is very kind about it."

So presently she was following her guide again through narrow passages through which people were going either way, with no eyes for her or her overweening preoccupations. She was again at the door, and the attendant was knocking and receiving a "Come in."

The star was sitting talking to Bertie.

Both of them! Here before her again—both of them!

Back to her mind, in a fear-coloured instant, came that day when Bertie left home forever. What exactly had passed between him and his father she had never known. Here he was again for her hands to touch, her eyes to devour; to fill her heart with pride. But he was a stranger. She smiled at them both, thanking Frances Falaise for this pleasure in a tremulous voice.

"I had the chance to come to see you again, Miss Falaise. . . ."

They both smiled; said something appropriate; something interested or surprised. She thought: "*I must have courage.*" She said: "Both my son and daughter left home suddenly some years ago and I have not seen them since. And you are so like her, Miss Falaise."

"I am an American citizen," said Frances. "I am so sorry you are disappointed, but I am not your daughter. And Mr. Falaise here is an American too. He has just come over from New York. You look as if you could be a lovely mother," she said in her caressing voice. "But—alas—you are not mine."

"Let me take care of this lady, Frances," said Bertie Falaise.

Frances turned to her dressing-table, saying very charmingly: "So sorry about your family. So sorry. So sorry. . . . Where's my dresser?"

As if the dresser was waiting for the word, she came forward from the wardrobe of the capacious dressing-room. Over her shoulder Frances Falaise gave Diana a flyaway goodbye glance; and Bertie was ushering the tremulous visitor out.

"It's a crush again," he said. "Let me get you a taxi."

They were among the first of the thrusting, hurrying hundreds of the audience to get out, thanks to his hand strong and certain on her arm. "Keep steady," he said. "Three steps to go down." On the shallow steps she had his steel arm round her for a moment protecting her from the crowd—the talking, acclaiming crowd continually renewed by the press from behind; all saying the Falaise was marvellous.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked when they had won freedom from the crush; and were on the pavement, still jostled; though the press lessened and receded.

"I want a taxi out to Highgate," she said, giving the first address in her head. "The doorman can get me one."

"Not for another ten minutes. He's booked with orders. . . . My car should be just round that corner." A car came nosing deviously along. It was his?

"Let me run you out there," he said courteously.

"I couldn't trouble a strange . . ."

But he was Bertie.

"Nonsense. It will be a pleasure. I can keep a couple of fellows waiting for once." The car nosed up; a press before and behind. The doorman cast a preoccupied eye on them; and squeezed through to open the door.

"Enjoyed the play, madam?" It was all hasty; the enquiry; the smile; the ready hand for Bertie's tip—yes, Bertie's—and they were out of the press round the entrance. "Holly Manse, Holly Hill, Highgate, please," she said, and he repeated it through the speaking tube. The chauffeur edged away; and they were into the clear.

It would be such a short drive.

"What a nice address," he said lightly.

"It is my eldest daughter's address. She married Sir Bernard Watmer; an engineering firm."

"Indeed. I shall probably run across him. We have connections here. I'm"—he paused; and she thought correctly that he spoke of himself with great modesty—"an engineer too. I am in the firm of Nickel and Knight; I came from the States, you know."

"You have not an American accent."

"I daresay I left that at Harvard."

"You must have done. . . ." She failed, because anything she could say was so utterly fatuous. No doubt he had a family out there; no doubt he was deeply rooted in American soil; yet still he was Bertie.

"You look very young for your age," she said quietly.

"And what is my age?"

"Thirty-six," she said quietly.

"What a good guesser you are. You are so nearly right."

"Your birthday is on December 7th."

"Wrong, I'm afraid, there. My birthday is on May 10th."

May 10th. . . . The day he left home forever. She had all the dates imprinted on her mind. She could not forget any one of them.

"I must always be back home for it," he continued. "I always take my mother to the theatre that evening; and afterwards we dance."

"Your mother and you. . . ."

"Yes. We dance. I don't know a better dancer."

"I expect you live at home?"

"Well, Mrs. Wycombe, if it interests you, I don't. I'm about; I have a flat in New York. My mother has a peach of a place in Connecticut. On my birthday she comes up and is my guest."

"Oh, happy woman!" burst from Diana.

"Yes. Sure she's a happy woman. And I'm a happy boy—because that's what she still calls me—to have her."

"We are nearly there," said Diana feebly, after a pause.

"Yes. Your traffic is all right up this way."

The car had run almost uninterruptedly; the traffic had thinned out to a trickle. Quiet roads passed under their noiseless wheels. If time would wait!

The car drew up. The gates of Holly House, white and inconspicuous, were closed. Someone sauntering in the garden opened them. Of course it was Bernard.

It was fine and still and dry. "Why," she said, "there's my son-in-law guessing it's me! And airing the dogs."

The young man got out to help her. She stood: "Won't you come in?" she said.

"Lady, I've people waiting for me. It's been a great pleasure——"

"*Wait! I am not staying here. . .*" she cried.

"Get in quickly, then," he said, still good-tempered; still smiling; and surprised at nothing. She got in, calling something to Bernard, standing there, watchful; not pleased; dogs at his feet. "After all, he can't come in, Bernard," she cried out of the window; as they moved away again.

It was a humiliating moment—her aberrations, he must be thinking—and gently, humbly, she tried to explain to him.

"I—I wanted you just to meet my daughter Marion. . . . Your sister," she breathed. "But I think I had better not . . . just now. Forgive me! Forgive me!"

"Where are you really staying?"

"The Andover Ladies Club, Hallam Street, please."

Now she was sunk into her corner, handkerchief at her lips, biting it to bite back silly emotion.

"That isn't out of the way much," he said quietly, comfortingly. "We'll soon have you there."

"I am sorry. Really sorry."

"Nuts!"

Now she was really before the club again, and he was

escorting her as far as the doors which the night porter was opening. She said "Thank you" to the porter; and walked swiftly through the hall out of sight.

He stood watching her out of sight; and got back into his car.

"Home," he said. His face was quiet and clear. He had been afraid that she would disturb him terribly; but—no. No.

As for her, she went to bed, saying to herself: "His name is Falaise. He has a mother. A mother. A mother whom he takes out dancing. . . . I never thought of dancing—how did she? Except for Charlie I never danced—not with my sons. Not with my sons! How could I think of it when . . . But it would have been fun if one of them had taken me out dancing before it was too late for me. . . ."

Her jealousy of that woman four thousand miles away was the hottest jealousy she had ever known. And his air of having found himself so completely; his firm withdrawal from her fancies; his satisfaction complete and whole—so it seemed all brought closer and more poignantly to her this death which she had been slowly dying, till now she was nearly fifty-six and almost dead, unless some unknown elixir of life came to revive her.

Shame! She must try to be rather more like that other mother of his—with whom he went out dancing. What was she like? Slim; or a little heavy with the years? How many were her years? How did she dress? What made her laugh—and made him laugh with her? How had she mastered—or helped him to master—those sullen nervous silences, those distrusts with the very act of living, of drawing breath, which had assailed him at home, years ago, before his break into freedom?

He had shown himself cool, strong, competent; easy with sureness. A son of whom to be proud—for of course, beyond denial, he was her son. She knew she could rejoice in him; feel his wide interests as her own; watch his

important life—it was important, she was sure—with pride. Robert and Charles were their father over again ; this son was—could have been—all hers.

But it was of the other mother, the usurper mother, of whom she thought continuously before weariness overclouded her so that, suddenly, like a younger unclouded person, she fell asleep, fast, deep ; dreamlessly.

She woke to the thought of him, though ; saying aloud ; “I should have asked him how long he is staying over here.”

On her breakfast tray the next morning was the paper she had asked the hall porter to send up. She opened it straight away at the feature article, a three-quarter page, with more photographs of Frances Falaise. She had arrived ; she had conquered—the pale golden girl who had ridden the pale golden colt through the mists of an October morning eleven years ago ; and in a mist like the mist which had curled about them that morning, hiding—veiling—clothing with strangeness horse and rider—she was veiled from the woman who now sat up in bed, trifling at her breakfast tray.

And still it was of the second mother that Diana thought.

The young woman who looked at her lazily from the excellent photograph smiled ; was beautiful. Diana began to read her ten-years record—apparently the first year of two were veiled in some obscure journalising—she was the only child ; but Mr. Bertie Falaise was her stepbrother, and they were great friends. She had been born in California. . . . No. She had not turned first to the films—the stage was her passion ; her life’s ambition. As a child she had gone to all the plays possible. Her real mother had died when she was very young—she and her stepbrother were all in all to each other in those early years. . . . She had played in this play ; that play. And very wittily—yet without hurt to anyone—she discoursed to her interviewer of her early stage experiences. She had a long contract with Methuen and Foley, with whom Mr. Henry Follett, the financier, was associated.

No ; she did not think of a separate British contract, though she was having the compliment of some offers. This experience of playing in London was wonderful.

Everyone was so kind.

Yes ; she thought she might be able to do the film of the play—the offer had been cabled already—from Hollywood of course—but it really depended on how long she must be here. It had still to open in New York.

“ My tastes ? Oh, they’re so simple, they’re hardly worth talking about. They’re much like my stepbrother’s. We’ve always been very close together. . . . Dancing. Oh, and fishing. Bertie and I have a summer camp in the Adirondacks—but I very seldom get away to it.

“ No.” The sad note here. “ Bertie and I have no parents living. But he has his adopted mother. There : Isn’t that lovely for him ? . . . No, I haven’t been legally adopted yet. . . . But she claims me too ! ” Here Miss Falaise laughed merrily, and enjoyed the joke—for it was only too evident that that was her own fault.

“ You don’t surprise me,” said the reporter gallantly.

Miss Falaise said that she had so many friends back at home that she didn’t feel the need of a parent now. Besides, only her own dear parents would have done. “ You can’t replace real parents by other parents, though you may try.”

Interview stuff :

“ But your brother. . . . ”

“ Oh, our adopted mother sits very lightly on us.” Mutual laughter—the reporter found that exquisitely double-edged. . . .

Diana laid the paper down. The coffee had lost its flavour ; she merely crumbled the toast. There came to her as if it were yesterday, as if she were living it again, the day Bertie went for good. She had not known what Charlie had said to him behind the closed gunroom door. Bertie had

gone quietly upstairs, packed a few possessions ; taken, besides his Army valise, the small Gladstone bag that had been provided for him in his first term at his preparatory school ; shabby now ; with a broken lock—the careless boy ; and he had gone. He had not come to kiss her goodbye. She had not run out of the drawing-room where she had waited, sick with anxiety and foreboding. Charlie had come in, having lingered in the smokeroom to see the bailiff who had been up to the house with some idea about wire netting.

When he came in, she said through dry lips : “ Where did Bertie go ? ”

“ Bertie ? He talked of leaving for good just because . . . My girl, you mustn’t cry. He’ll be back. . . . Glad to come. War’s over. He could have gone into the same firm that was good enough for Charles if he didn’t want to follow me. . . . They were willing. . . . But no. He still wants to be an engineer—you know how he’s been messing about always. Said he and I would never get along, and he’s right ! There’s *one* thing he’s right about ! ”

He had been standing a distance away from her, looking at her. He jingled coins in his pocket.

“ You didn’t listen. . . . Why are you looking like that ? ” he said.

“ You didn’t do anything . . . ? ”

He was silent. Then : “ I wanted to give him a darn good thrashing for his insolence—he said a lot more than I’m telling you. . . . ”

“ You . . . ”

“ ‘ Take off your jacket,’ I said. ‘ Take off yours,’ he said. We both took our jackets off—then I picked up my riding whip. He fought for it and broke it. Then he stood. Just stood. ”

“ Absurd ! You fool ! You fool ! ” she cried.

Their old butler came in with logs.

And both knew the servant had heard what she, at this distance, had not. The servant went out.

"Grinning at me all the time," Charlie said explosively. But his explosiveness died as he saw her face. "'Get out,' I said, 'till you see sense.' He's up in his room, loafing, I suppose."

"He is twenty-five," she said slowly, "and he has been a soldier."

Yes. He had been in the Royal Engineers—his choice. . . . He had gone swiftly, directly war broke out. . . . Italy, France. . . .

She pressed the bell. The butler came back. "Where's Mr. Bertie?" she asked, dry-lipped, trying to speak naturally.

"I heard him go out by the side door, ma'am." And grieving for her frightened face, he added: "I think he's got his Army bags. . . ."

"All right; that'll do," Charlie had said roughly.

When the servant had gone, he came and tried to take her into his arms. She looked at him. "Go and see," she said. He had never heard that voice before. He never heard it since. He went up to Bertie's room; empty, and drawers pulled out. He came down again, but was not able to touch her; she stood so far away. Yet it was not a room's length. He went upstairs again. Came back. "I think he's gone off . . . but he'll come back all right," he said . . . looking and looking at her.

"This time he will never come back," she said.

He roused to her anguish. "Darling, don't take it like that—a job between father and son. . . . Dearest. . . ." He went out of the room to the telephone. In these melodramas, he thought roughly, young chaps always make for London. He called Paddington and got the stationmaster; felt a fool; only for her face would he have done it. He told of the necessity—family illness, he said—telling the lie sickly. Could the stationmaster possibly have the train from Oxford met and tell a passenger named Wycombe that his mother was seriously ill. . . .

As he returned to her, still standing in the centre of the drawing-room, he remembered things which he hoped she did not, in that moment, remember. That Bertie had a valid passport, also he had a good Army gratuity and back pay still in his pocket, no doubt. He had been demobilised only lately. "But we shall find him," he thought. He did not try very hard at first—for in his decisive mind he determined that his son would come back—he would know that it would be best.

But he wasn't a minor. He was a man.

Charlie Wycombe never heard of or from his son again; nor did she.

And Irene went with him. . . . Well, they had loved each other dearly.

She had let it happen. She always told herself that. She had let it happen—and only she—and Bertie—knew how it was the climax of long, unjust, unspeakable hatred between father and son. She had by then come a long way from the innocence and trust of her youth.

She had gathered no wide knowledge of the outside world to replace it.

Diana rose, dressed, descended to the lounge of the club, knowing no face there. A small group of unusually smart women were gathered together. They were speaking of the new play from New York; and the star. "She's so young to have come so far," one said. Another laughed: "She came the luxurious way, I gather. She's Follett's girl."

A third said: "She'll be able to keep him happy. He's old enough to be her father. . . ."

Another said: "But her talent would get her through—and she's lovely. . . ."

"My Irene," Diana thought. And while she would have liked to scourge the insinuating women with her tongue, she did not.

"But," said the first voice, "it takes longer, I imagine."

"Who is this Follett?" asked someone; and a voice from a woman pleased to be knowledgeable answered: "Oh, he's something to do with plays in America; and films. A great business man, my husband said to me last night. Men get to know all these things, don't they? I'm sure I don't know how."

"Oh, they're far worse gossips at their clubs than we are!"

Diana went out. She realised, now that Charlie had gone, how thoroughly she had let the world slip by her except for a few pleasant country neighbours, or an occasional letter or even visit from old school friends. Her family had all been in India—Army or Government service, and, as the years passed, had retired to places like South Africa or the South of France because of the mounting British income-tax. Very few of them were left now—her girl cousins had all been older by years than herself. They had called her "the afterthought baby", born, as she was, in her parents' middle age.

Charlie had been her dearest brother, friend, husband; and staunch lover.

Soon there would be grandchildren called Wycombe?

Perhaps! Perhaps! She didn't know her sons' views on that. Just two for Charles, and two for Robert, maybe. She must settle herself in her small new house; and wait.

"You are well, madam?" asked the hall porter as he put her bag into the taxicab.

She understood he was commiserating with her on her loss; he had seen it in the obituaries; and he sounded kind. No; there had been more than that—Robert had shown the paragraph in *The Times* to her after the funeral. "*Mr. Charles Wycombe, the well-known breeder of Shorthorns, died yesterday. He was an important figure wherever good cattle were shown; it is understood that he thought of South Africa as a promising place to transfer part of his herd, when one of his sons would have carried on the tradition there. A friend and neighbour*"

of his went out ten years ago, and now is one of the best-known breeders of Herefords and Guernseys in the Union. We refer to Lord Weller. . . .

"Yes," she thought, "or no? Yes. Failing Bertie, he might have sent Charles or Robert out if . . . if . . . He might have shipped away all my children. . . ."

How narrowly a mother thought! This was feminine anger! Bordering on hysteria! She felt ashamed of herself.

But she thought on: "Then we should have been alone together again as he would have liked. . . . Then . . . but now one of us has died; and the other is left. . . ."

She looked out at the impersonal streets. She began trying to think of the bailiff's house in which—she knew—her two young men were only too impatient to see her installed. It was on the outskirts of the big home-farm—at the end of the village; with a garden all around it; and the front windows facing out over part of the land. Almost she would have chosen to look the other way—not to see the land which Charles and Robert might be going to farm their own way—if they decided on it. She knew that their ideas differed from their father's; if only for the sake of differing. She would be perfectly acquiescent, of course; just taking her due.

Satisfied with her due. . . .

She settled into a corner of a third-class carriage—Charlie would not have let her do that—the best for her always! She hadn't asked to be met, but since she would alight in the station of the considerable town of Middleton—the village had no station—there would be taxis.

Although she was going out as soon as possible—let all hurry be hers alone!—she could still direct the taxi to her old home.

The hedges were sweet with late spring; May was nearly over. She savoured every foot of the way. It was nice that the taxi-driver had recognised her at once, and had a sad eye for her mourning. "Your car not here, madam?"

"No. I did not telephone for it."

"A nice surprise for the family, then, madam!"

She had not yet thought definitely, as she was to think, over Frances Falaise and Follett—the two of them; and their relationship. She put off thinking. But the thoughts would creep in, refuse them as she might. Where would they be this week-end? Not together? Oh, surely not together!

Probably the actress would rest; receive friends? Or they might drive down to lunch at the house of one of Follett's acquaintances in the country. There would be no harm in that—and she thought of the women at the club.

They were evil speakers. . . .

Of course Follett—a backer of the play, she understood—would pay attention to the star.

The taxi drew up at the house. "Just in time for your lunch, madam," the driver said, standing to hold the door open. Then he carried her bag in after her just as the butler-chauffeur came through the hall.

He had heard her drive up. He said, "Good morning, madam," and took the bag. She stood a foolishly long time before she could muster the right fare; in fact Robert, gun under arm, had come up with her before she turned from the driver to go in.

"Hullo, Mother."

"Hullo, dear!"

"Hope you did all your shopping. You should have telephoned and been met." The perfunctory kiss. . . . She could have seized and held him, and laid her head on his breast; his or Charles' breast; it didn't matter. She wanted so much to be able to talk with her sons—as she had not talked to anyone for years and years—no, not even with Charlie. She had had no one to talk to, as she wanted to talk; and she had no one now. Nor ever would?

"Hungry?" he said perfunctorily. The taximan had

driven away. His had been the friendliest eyes. Well, the class he came from was open in grief and in joy. . . .

"I hardly did any shopping, though I meant to give the quarterly order to the stores," she said, walking in before him. Then he passed her and she saw his indifferent back going to the gunroom through the door at the back of the hall.

He used to beat them there ; and they had always come out dry eyed and hating. The only tears had been her own.

She wished memories—the wrong memories—would not well in her throat now ; inviting, compelling tears if she were not careful.

She went upstairs to leave her things ; to take off her hat and see to her hair. There ! She had meant to go to the best hairdresser with whom she could get an appointment on such short notice ! Her hair showed need of professional care. *I'll go up again ! . . . I'll go again ! . . .*

She was free ; with her empty time and her empty arms.

Free to dally about in hairdressers' boudoir-like shops ; free to rejuvenate—she had kept remarkably smooth-skinned and young—free to take up with her lost friends—who were they, and where ? Not one of the children had understood.

She had lost her children ; to save them from Charlie. She had distracted Charlie's attention from his merciless judgments, by her wiles and her love.

"It's over," she thought. "I must not think of it so much." Ah, but she now faced the harvest. It was a poor unnourished one ; flimsily light in the ear ; short in the stalk ; a scanty harvest from which she would have to turn hungry away.

They sat down to luncheon ; she and Robert. Charles came in late—made apologies flurried from habit of dismay. "But it's cold," she cried. "What does it matter if you are late ? Besides," she said, "this is your table ; your house, darlings."

"Your kind promises have still to be put into legal form, Mother. You might change your mind."

"My mind is the same as it always has been," she said in a low voice, afraid of tears. "I have always thought this way."

"How was Town?"

"Oh, very nice. I hadn't stayed at the club for quite a long time; I am glad I kept up membership."

And as she said this, she wondered if she would ever be glad of anything any more.

"I went to the play again. I had a box."

"A box—all by yourself!" Robert exclaimed this. And she remembered then that her sons had not been very affluent, till now.

"For once I had a box all for myself. I wanted to think."

"An expensive way of thinking," said Robert, raising his eyebrows at her with a smile.

"I've been looking over your new home this morning, Mother."

"Oh, have you, dear?"

"It'll suit you down to the ground, I should think. You'll want to get away whenever you like. . . . We want to make it easy for you, Mother."

"I know you do, dear." How she wished that all her dreary family lies were truth! Of course Charles wanted the house she now lived in! It was natural and right that he should have it. He would marry soon now. She knew there was a girl in London—though neither she nor Charlie had been told anything.

The young men kept tight minds; tight lips. Of course she would expect this till Morris Newland had hastened the formalities through. The formalities would not be difficult since her mind was made up; and hers was the only voice that counted in the harrowing business. And the business was very harrowing to her. "I shall tell Morris Newland

to be as quick as he can," she smiled. "He must keep you informed."

"How are Marion's kids?"

"Oh, well," she said. "Wonderful."

Robert was watching her. Charles was the stronger character—oh, very strong. Robert was swifter to hurt. She said to herself when he next spoke that he didn't mean it.

"They have a happy home," he said, "more than we had. I'd like to find Irene; but I suppose we never shall."

"There's her portion of the money to make over," she said, keeping a stiff upper lip. "If we don't hear from her it must be invested carefully and accumulate."

"Money should be working," said Robert.

"It will be working, won't it, my dear?"

"In any way, I suppose—yes."

"Shall I run you down to the house, Mother?" asked Charles. "Old Miller moved out while you've been away. Decent of him. He's got six months here to go yet. And then we *may* keep him on. He's got his eye on a cottage—very nice—the one that artist had—as you must have his house now. It's all been decided."

He ended on impatience. To him all this talk was a mere beating the air. He hadn't decided to quit his profession yet; the train service was excellent; if they kept on Old Miller and if Robert sold his share of the practice which engaged him, to become entirely a farmer, it would be easy to make the best of both worlds. Time would show; quite a short time would decide.

But their mother's affairs must be tied up—watertight—first.

Ageing women were apt to change their minds. And Morris did not seem to be hurrying unduly. One could read Morris's mind; he and Robert had read it together; Morris was allowing time for her to change, or ameliorate, her decision in her own favour. It came to him that really they'd

never known their mother very well. In a way they had known their father better—in a way, he thought cynically. Their father had spoken his mind and wreaked his will.

"I'll certainly have Miller's house," she said. "Your father always thought of it as a sort of dower-house."

"What a grand name!"

"You could rename it that," said Charles, absently. He was thinking of the wife he was going to bring here; a girl they had not known; nor had he ever mentioned her by name. But this girl would expect to meet his mother; and his mother would be very nice to the girl.

He wanted his mother to play up; and of course Bernard and Marion; and Clare and her husband—they must play up too. There would be some entertaining now. Charles thought swiftly of his girl; and her blowsy mother whom he had met in a canteen during the war. . . . Pretty, blowsy mother, seeming young and attractive to a soldier then. Not so desirable now. . . .

"Time there were some happy kids in this house, if one of us stays here," he said, regardless of—not guessing—her assaulted heart as he spoke. "Bring it the atmosphere it ought to have."

"I've often thought," said Robert reflectively, "that if it hadn't been for old Rivers I don't know how we could have got on at all."

Their mother stood up. They rose too. Charles opened the door for her. "Yes. It was a very difficult time, I suppose," she said slowly, turning to face them on the threshold of the room. "But for Miss Rivers I don't know how it could have all been managed." Then she went out; and though they hovered a second or two, she did not pause nor look back.

From the open dining-room door the staircase was in view—rather a noble staircase for a large but modest house. She went up slowly, out of sight.

Charles returned to the table.

"Tomorrow I must be early at the office," Robert said.

"And I must go too."

"Coming down in the evening?"

"No. When Morris telephones about things I'll be down for another week-end."

Diana had not touched the pudding which had been cut on the side table; they were self-helpful at lunch. Now Charles cut himself a large portion, and helped Robert. "We shall keep the servants on, for a bit, perhaps," he said. "They can show June the ropes and she can get the new ones. We'll be married at St. Margaret's. And there's no mourning in this family."

"I don't know why you say that like that," Robert said.

"What is there?"

"Must make a show—for Mother," Robert said.

"I daresay Mother would like one of us to go with her to the house. . . ."

"You go."

"No. You go."

"All right," said Robert; adding: "there'll be no actual hurry for my wife to decide. It's all in the air. I know of a small house; and she'll probably be up there most of the time. She's not used to the country."

"My girl's going to be just my wife," said Charles. "Live as I do."

Robert looked at him quickly.

"I want a few children," said Charles.

"Well, once the affairs are settled and we have the cheque-book, we can decide a lot of things. . . . Mother's been pretty good."

"Oh yes. She's been pretty good. I wonder he left things to her—I mean so absolutely to do what she liked with."

"I'm grateful to her——"

"Oh, I don't know," Charles said. "It's the natural

gesture. She'll have all she needs. Morris'll see to that if she doesn't."

"We'd see to it."

Robert got up. "I'll have a cigarette in the hall; catch Mother as she comes down. She's so damn self-effacing I might miss her. . . ." And, just as Diana was coming downstairs again, "I'll get the car," he said.

"Thank you, dear."

Charles stood lighting his cigarette in the doorway of the dining-room. Things were moving, he thought. When she'd seen the house again, she would soon collect what she cared for from this larger place, and leave it to him and his bride if they wanted it. She smiled at him. He hadn't the least idea of what it felt to a woman of over fifty to have to make a life for the first time. For of course—she felt it more and more—Charles had made both their lives together. He had welded them; and guided her feet early, into his ways. Robert was always easier than Charles had now become. . . . But not so easy, not so kind, loving as the lost boy would have been, mourned her heart. They talked pleasantly as he drove the short distance to the house in which she was going to live. He came in with her, and showed interest in all she said; and she tried to say enough of her ideas for the place; she tried to formulate plans and she asked his advice. She must learn to lean on them—maybe they would like that. She must subtly flatter her two young men, show them how much they mattered to her. Their children must come to her gladly; how gladly she would receive them!

"I shall leave the piano for Charles, of course. . . . I don't play much; nowadays people play well or leave it alone. Everyone seems in some degree to be a virtuoso!" Yet she remembered sitting down at the nursery piano and playing songs for the small children to sing . . . till somehow her nursery hours became so curtailed. But now that she was free . . .

Free? She was lost without him.

"There's plenty of linen for both homes. Anyway, I can buy more. Only perhaps Charles's wife will have some of her own. . . . And you, Robert dear, you're marrying too?"

"I'm marrying too. London wedding; double wedding, Charles and I want. And her people are in London."

"Bring her to see me soon!"

"I'll ask her. . . . Her name's April."

She remembered that young people now didn't always think it a duty—or a pleasure either—to add parents-in-law to their life. "I shall be very, very unobtrusive," she laughed. "But of course I long to meet her."

"We'll arrange it pretty soon. As soon as Charles and I have settled about things."

"Oh yes. This dividing up. . . ." she achieved.

"I hope you feel all right about what you are doing, Mother."

"I am very happy about it. I wish it were all done now. . . ."

"Well, you've only to call on Charles and me—you know that. We'll do all we can to get you settled and happy. You've only got to say the word——"

"Darling," she said, startling him, for she seldom spoke so lovingly; she had not risked it. "Darling, I have all I want; all I want except Irene and Bertie."

"Ah!" he said in some confusion. "We'll have to keep hoping."

She wanted to tell him about them; in London; unmistakable—at least to her. He would try to persuade her out of the idea like the others would. He would be very uneasy.

He left her in the house that was to be her home; to think. "To dream up all you're going to do," he said, smiling watchfully. "You might prefer a flat in London after all. . . ." And he said more abruptly: "Since you've chosen to be so generous to us it wouldn't run to both if you were to be comfortable. . . ."

"I don't think I'll have a flat in London. I have my club. . . . But don't wait, dear. I'll walk home through the village and call at the rectory ; and they'll give me a cup of tea."

He brightened. "Well, if you'd rather. . . ." She watched him away, standing behind a curtain so that he should not see her if he looked back to wave, at the gate. But he did not turn. She sat and thought about the house. She knew that it was best to plan and get busy over her new arrangements ; action helped. But what he had said about the London flat as an alternative to this house hovered in her mind. After all, she had a little money of her own ; she might take a furnished flat for a time as well as keeping this house. . . . just to see if Frances Falaise would not visit her there. But who was she to invite a star of the stage to her home ? Besides, Frances Falaise would not come.

She took measurements for curtains and rugs. And while she busied herself, Robert was speaking to Charles in the gunroom. "I suggested a flat in London instead. . . ."

"Not a good idea. She'd always be wanting to come down and stay ; and quite between ourselves, do you really want that ? I don't," said Charles frankly, with a hard look. "We'll bring up our own children, June and I. And you too . . . ? Remember how they always shelved us ? She can't have the best of both worlds. No one can."

"He influenced her, I always thought."

"I wouldn't influence June in a thing like that. We stood it—you and I and Marion and Clare. But Irene was right to get away. I admired her for it. I only hope she's happy somewhere. I think I'd bet she is."

"It's not as though we owe Mother anything."

"No. But she's faced all that fair and square ; give her that. She is paying up—though hard cash is the only coin she can pay in now. Morris thinks she's wonderful."

"Yes. . . . Now shall we offer old Miller a year's certainty ? We shall want time to see how to wind up our own affairs if we're going in together."

"Yes. Offer him a year's certainty, I think. Or—better—six months. . . ."

"Mother'll play hostess next week-end or the one after, I daresay. I want April down and you'll want June? I suppose she expects to meet Mother. April does."

"Yes. Get the first meeting over. Get things started."

"When are you marrying?"

"Next month, if possible. And you? Same place—same day?"

"Same time. Savoy Chapel—or St. George's."

"Her people would want a show; though she and I would like it quiet."

"Give Mother a nice day out. . . ."

"Yes. We'll be giving ner that."

Diana sat in the rectory drawing-room, with the rector and his wife.

She could not have said that she knew them well—nor any of her other neighbours. But they were friendly and kind. Their children had played with hers—so Miss Rivers reported, in the holidays when she and Charlie were off on what he would say was another honeymoon. She knew them by sight; married now—but always home for Christmas and sometimes birthdays. Perhaps her future birthdays and Christmases would be spent at her own house—the bailiff's house into which she was moving—by her sons and their wives? She would try to make a great thing of it. She would love the girls—whoever they were; whatever they were like. There would be children to play with by and by; and no one to say her nay. She now talked quite happily with the elderly couple who were scrutinising her so keenly; who were really inviting her confidences, which the rector's wife had always thought were long overdue. Diana was aware of this; and chose her words scrupulously; she spoke as if Charlie were beside her. And still she drew across

her face the veil which had for years deluded or frustrated her neighbours ; the pretty veil of becoming colouring which some had admired ; but which, in time, had let too much light through to the beholder—and in the neighbourhood criticism, softly spoken perhaps, but none the less definite, had whispered that the Wycombe children had a poor life of it. . . . That “ it ” would recoil on their mother’s own head. Yes. People had said—quietly—as much as that.

“ And we hear your sons are going to be married ? How exciting for you. Two nice daughters-in-law ! We hope they will be married down here ? ”

“ Both sets of parents live in London ; I think they will be married there. . . . Of course I would have loved the weddings down here—but, after all, it’s the custom——”

“ Of course. Of course. You’ll go up for them ? ”

“ Of course. Mourning doesn’t prevent that nowadays. Does it ? . . . I should like something new ! ” she said suddenly. “ Not all black.”

“ A soft mauve would be charming on you,” said the rector’s wife as suddenly. It was like a faint revolt of two women.

She did not want to be in the country. She went up to London again, staying at her club ; allegedly to buy curtains, really to buy some beautiful clothes, mauve or grey ; or inspired black, which would give her no sense of mourning when she wore it. Marion went with her on these expeditions. But she went alone to see Frances Falaise for the third time in the part which, besides fitting her like a glove, had roused all theatrical London ; not to speak of the large audiences which crammed the theatre at every performance.

She was now quieter, more resolved ; and the afternoon when she went to Frances’s flat in the quiet serene hotel which headed a *cul-de-sac* she wore a new mauve dress, beautifully cut ; a small hat of deeper mauve ; she was perfectly gloved and shod. She wore a great antique brooch,

an amethyst set in frail gold filigree, which Charlie had bought her in Paris. That was after the birth of Robert, which Charlie wished her to forget. He always took her away as soon after the birth of a baby as he could. She put it on today only because it matched and complimented her new frock. She looked a most desirable caller to the personal lady's maid—the flat was serviced otherwise by the management—who opened the door. And the lady's maid had just begun to explain that Miss Falaise was not at home, when Frances herself came from her bedroom into the corridor ; and saw her former visitor again.

" Oh, Mrs. . . . ? " the star said, pausing.

" Wycombe. . . . But I hear you are not at home. Let me go away."

Mrs. Wycombe felt as though she was hovering in air for just ~~that~~ one moment before Frances Falaise spoke again. The lady's maid, she now noticed—yet without turning her eyes from the beautiful actress—was in hat and fashionable coat ; therefore going out. Frances said to the maid, without looking at her, keeping her eyes on the caller—" Don't wait, Jeanne ", and the maid was gone, silently closing the front door behind her. Frances and Diana stood facing each other.

In reply to what Diana had said, Frances answered that she had been just going to rest in her room ; she feared she must have her rest before the evening performance. . . . Diana stammered apologies, moving against the closed front door, her hand fumbling for the catch, though all the while her eyes would not leave the lovely star.

" So sorry, so sorry. Let me come again to explain to you," she said.

And as she spoke, the sitting-room door opened. Follett stood there ; framed in the doorway ; and as clearly as if someone had put a primer of proceedings into her hand, Diana understood.

She felt she was crying out : " But you are my daughter !

My daughter! My best loved . . .", only it was Follett speaking: "Let me see this lady out, dear."

Frances moved back into her own room and closed the door. Follett put his hand on the latch. "Miss Falaise must rest," he was saying; icy but suave. Diana looked at him, and saw that he wore a silk dressing-gown too.

He had been lounging in the sitting-room, no doubt.

"I am sorry, sorry," she faltered; and the door was open. She went out. "Good afternoon," he was saying behind her.

She was closed out; fully aware of what she had seen. The French maid had gone; the lovers were alone. The intruder must go too. She, the mother. When Charles had died—he whom she had felt could never die—she had risen from his side—he lying so calm, so still, so irrevocably gone from her—and her mind uttered spectacularly: *Now I go. When all the others are home, when all the others are picked up tight, and only two to come in from the wind and the rain—the wind and the rain I hear in my sleep—I must go to find the lost ones.*

She had not envisaged Charlie's death before his time; only the *some day* when she could go to seek; which now had come. . . . And she had not needed to seek; they had returned into her rocking world as strangers; who, seeing her outstretched hands, would turn from her, uncaring; unknowing. Who had not reappeared over her own dark horizon, small and poor; longing for her smile; her arms; for home which she represented; but as rich, uncaring; unforgiving. With the past forbidden to recur to memory. Oblivious alike of her love; and of need of her.

She went back—feeling beaten—to the Dover Club; to its comforts; its good service; to its members mostly vague about her. For Charlie had said always: "We've got each other. I hate to share you. We are happy. Let the world go by. Come here. I want you. . . ."

She had now glimpsed her daughter—painfully prayed for, long lost—much longed for—in the act of barter. Selling herself for what she wanted. It was of no use smoothing

out the matter ; the papers had said, hadn't they—" Miss Falaise has played lead in New York plays for the last five years . . . was one of the highest paid Hollywood stars in the two biggest parts women have ever played . . . is a fine horse-woman ; which gained her the Hollywood contract, when she was twenty, of *Pandora Rides*. . . ."

She would ask her one day if she remembered a pale colt in the autumn mists, while she still had a golden mane down her own back. . . .

But when—*now*—could she ask her ? After she had seen the conniving maid leave the flat ; and Follett come out in his dressing-gown from the sitting-room. . . .

She, a woman who had been so passionately loved, could feel no doubt. . . . But that had been wedlock. Wedlock. . . . Perhaps Frances Falaise and this man were to marry ? But did her golden girl love this grey man with the passive face ; the piercing eyes ? He had a well-built athletic figure—but he was many, many years older than the golden girl. It hadn't been only buying and selling, had it ? Anything but that !

Perhaps he had a wife ; and they could not marry. . . . Then the child should try to escape from him. Always her mother's home, her mother's arms, would be open to her. . . . Yet . . . imagine her now, down there among them !

All the neighbours would want to be asked to dinner ! Or—a garden-party perhaps. . . . *Of course I couldn't do that yet ; so soon. . . .*

In the golden girl's life there would be no rules ? Oh yes. She could now envisage rules ; all designed to forward a career ; all for fame. . . . Stern physical rules of exercise, diet, rest, incessant training of some sort or another. Training of the will, till now the ardent rebellious young girl had her life in hand.

And then, distastefully, Diana thought of Follett as a lover ; she forced herself to think of him. She had never met—when young—the gentlenesses, the care, the tenderness, the understanding, the technique of elderly men in the

arts of love. Charlie had been the simple, robust, jealous lover—near her ownage—till the last. She realised that, knowing only one man, she could not judge either Frances—*no, call her Irene when I am alone*—nor Follett by her own yardstick.

And then her thoughts were for Bertie. And strangely enough as it seemed to her, just as she was about to enter her club, she saw him approaching her. It wasn't really strange, of course; he had probably been lunching near, at the Berkeley perhaps, and there was some office he was using nearby, while over here. This hard, quick, fair, dominant man would have his business contacts—she couldn't imagine him vacillating any more; never any more the heartachingly lonely boy home from school not sure of his reception at home if Father were about; keeping out of sight as much as he could until perhaps the others came from their preparatory school, or the daughters returned from their school.

She hovered at the entrance to the club, knowing all through her that he had seen her, was going to pass by, and that she must not touch his arm nor speak to him, unless he recognised her from that one meeting at supper after the first night of the *Falaise* play; and just one other time.

His hand went tentatively to his hat—only tentatively. A nice-looking fiftyish woman; in her mauve frock so carefully chosen. . . . She would look different now in a hat than when she was bareheaded, hair dressed for an occasion, wearing black. . . . But he must not go by unheeding. She smiled and he raised the hat and passed by. His eyes had hardly rested on her—a passing uncertain look; and he had gone.

But next time perhaps . . . next time. . . .

As she went into the club she decided to ask Bernard if he could find out how long Bertie was to be here. Was his name really *Falaise*—or was that a professional name of his sister only? Could she put these questions naturally? Somehow she must find out his true name.

She rang Bernard's office—the sort of thing she never did. She hoped what she said sounded natural.

"Ah, Bernard," she said. "This is"—she avoided saying "your mother-in-law"—"Diana. Someone was asking me the name of Miss Falaise's brother—you know. The fair man who came to supper with her on the first night."

"Oh, that? His name is Herbert Falaise. Same as hers, you know."

"Oh, Herbert Falaise. . . . Thank you. I'll tell my friend."

Even over the telephone she was a very poor liar ; but she could not see Bernard smiling at her.

"He's staying in Half Moon Street. Anyone can get him through Nickel and Knight's, you know. Cannon Street. And how are you?"

"Oh, well, thank you."

"Staying at your club?"

"Yes. Going home today."

"You should have come to us again."

"How nice of you, Bernard. But I really must learn how to be independent! Love to my Marion."

"I will give it to my Marion."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye. Take care of yourself."

"Come down soon."

Then again the journey home ; and the car at the station with the butler-chauffeur at the wheel. This was when she missed Charlie so devastatingly. When she alighted before Charles's house—that was what it was in all but handing over—she was alone. No welcome but the servant's at the station ; no welcome as she stepped inside the front door in the late spring twilight. A lonely meal.

Yes. Rivers was indicated. Rivers, telephoned, had already said she would come. "It'll be a dear sweet home ; and I shan't be in the way, as you know," she had said, accepting. Another three weeks and she would have Rivers.

Charles and Robert were in Town at their respective offices. She pictured them taking out girls tonight ; yes, each with his soon-to-be bride. She had been given no gossip of the weddings ; she must know more. She must see the girls ; she must talk with the other mothers. . . .

"I will go up to the Academy," she thought. "But I suppose I shall miss the Horse Show this year. . . ."

At the thought tears rose from her very heart ; tears for Charlie, who had always been proud of escorting her to the best seats ; and well he looked in his morning coat, fresh buttonhole bought in Piccadilly ; she in her new suit. They had kept all occasions dear to both of them quite to themselves. Yes. Quite to themselves.

Her lonely table looked very nice as usual. She went through dinner. And she thought: "I will go into the other house tomorrow ; ready or unready, it shall be tomorrow." When once she had decided this she knew she would not change her mind. But when the boys came down for the week-end she would try for better talks ; better terms. She would pray that the new daughters-to-be would like her.

Chapter 4

SHE was in her new house ; trying for order from the chaos old Miller had left. None of the furniture was his—nor was it hers ; she had most of it carried to capacious outhouses and there stored, except for essentials. Cooking pots and pans ; and some old mirrors and period pieces and china she kept. The old man had moved, after all, to lodgings rather than go on with a household. "You do just what you like, ma'am." He was not annoyed nor self-pitying. He just wanted to retire if Robert and Charles could spare him. She closed herself in and got the rooms right—new carpets were

sent down and laid by experts from London—all during the next week, with the help of village people more willing than she had expected to find them, since she had been among them so little.

She made a beautiful room which she called Irene's room.

And at the same time she had the garden revolutionised. It had been rough, uncared for. "A good farmer is a bad gardener," had been old Miller's precept. Morris Newland came to give his advice often. The miracle of the seven days of that week had to be seen to be believed.

And all the time she felt obscurely that she betrayed Charlie, because of all that was in her mind. And she felt: "My children shall love me for myself alone—they shall not think of me any longer as unable to stand on my own feet—I will be strong."

To Morris, who stood looking at her as this thing passed through her mind, she said: "Morris, I must be strong."

He moved nearer. "Yes. Be strong."

"You never married, Morris. . . ."

"No," he said. "I never married. I was in love with a married woman. I like that dress you wore at dinner."

Then there fell a silence between them.

He broke it: "Think of yourself, Diana. I'll call you Diana now—if you allow me. Think of yourself; and let your children alone."

"But I want my children."

"The time is past. You must just be satisfied with what they have to give you. . . ."

"I don't want the money."

"Well, you have given most of it away. They all appreciate it."

"Irene's and Bertie's shares to be kept in trust and invested. Sorry to repeat that so often. Will you do the investing, Morris?"

"If you wish. I am a lawyer, though; I shall take the conservative view of their money. I think Robert and

Charles might want to keep it in the farm ; and pay a fair interest—till they get going on their own."

"I shall not agree to that. It will be invested outside the Wycombe interests for Bertie and Irene."

"Keep firm on that. I am with you."

She said haltingly: "It should be enough—oh, I don't want to press it—but enough that I have done what I have done."

"Fairness, generosity have nothing to do with the word 'enough'. They are feeling and behaving like most people would. But you, my dear"—he heard his voice saying "my dear" with pleasurable surprise—"have been kept out of all that."

She said: "His hair is fairer than it used to be. He was darker ; but then that only means the sun has bleached it. . . . He has been out in the open air——"

"You are speaking of Mr. Falaise, the actress's brother ?"

"Oh Bertie. . . . Who told you ?"

"One of them—Charles or Robert heard about him from your son-in-law—heard it on the telephone."

Anger took fire in her. It must have lain dormant in their mind—though they had been so kind, hadn't they ? *So kind.*

She said : "Oh. Well. You see, they don't care. Why should they care ? They all have their own lives. But . . . Irene and Bertie are part of my life ; as I want to be part—oh, a small part—of theirs."

"I advise . . . I beg you," said Morris steadily, "to make your own life apart from the adult experienced men and women you still think of as your children."

"There will be a battle over the money," she said tremulously. And she was right. The battle was hard fought between her men and herself. In the end she won. The money for Bertie and Irene was to be invested ; the investments trusted only to Morris Newland. *Everything trusted to Morris.* She came out of the dining-room from this further conference satisfied ; and Morris came close behind her ; regardless of the shrewd looks which followed them.

"Are you going up to the weddings?" he asked.

"I think I might, don't you?"

"Don't be timid any more. Don't wait for other people. If you are interested in your sons' weddings, why shouldn't you go?"

"So soon. . . ."

"You are thinking of yesterday. Today you can do what you like when the dead have gone."

"He will never go," she said.

"Yes, he will go," Morris answered, close to her.

The rest of the day was spent with Morris beside her; advising; devising; planning her new garden with her; planning with her the lengthening of the rose garden. How soon could it be all laid out? Would it be at its best this year? . . . "You're in a hurry," he said. "Go on being in a hurry. Make things go your way."

She stood thinking, when he said that. Hadn't she had everything her own way? Wasn't that the gift Charlie bestowed on her always? Her own way. . . . "I always had my own way, I think," she said.

And he answered: "Did you have it in the ways you wanted most?"

"No, I suppose not; but he did what he thought was right. Do you know, I'm going to have Miss Rivers again?"

"Good," he said. "Someone you can leave to look after the place. You're coming up to the Horse Show this year as usual, of course?"

"Why, no. . . . Charles and Robert never——"

"I want to take you. We'll go," he said. "As a matter of fact, I'm riding again. I'm jumping in the hunter's class. I can sit with you most of the time. You can stay at your club; and I'll come to fetch you. Better go to the afternoon show. . . . Because—what d'you think?"

"What? I *can't* think. . . ."

"That actress there's such a fuss about. . . . She's brought

a couple of jumpers over ; crazy about horses, they say. She's jumping."

"*Herself?*" she breathed.

"Herself. Afternoon show, of course. In the evening someone is riding for her. Her manager must be having fits."

"I'd like to go to the afternoon show."

"It's extraordinary of her to do it. Can't think how they let her—do you remember——" He tailed off. He did not want to touch on Irene with her ; he had the male attitude of wishing to take unpleasant thoughts out of a woman's head. For he knew that she had never ceased to think of the lost daughter.

Then, for some reason—or lack of reason—she said quietly : "I expect that she knows what she is doing ; such a good horsewoman !"

"Still . . ."

"I shall *love* to go," she said ; and in that swift moment she remembered again how short a while it was since Charlie had been buried. But since his death time had not paused for him. Time had brought her swiftly to Irene and Bertie. She had many things in her mind as she stood with Morris ; for one thing, she hadn't yet seen the prospective brides. She hoped they would be simple, healthy, happy girls ; she could not envisage either of her sons marrying otherwise than safely and happily. They were solid men like Charlie had been. . . . "I understand they are both coming down next week-end," Morris said. "Robert was asking me about the tennis court—it wants re-laying—but he isn't going to do that. You'll be hostess, of course ?"

"They haven't said anything about that to me."

"They will do. I mean, they may do."

Something deep inside her said that she wasn't sure of that. Nor did she think Morris was sure. "I'm longing to meet them," she said, smiling. "Charlie would have liked to see them. . . . I wonder why it has been put off till now."

"Well, it isn't like it was in your time—and mine. Besides, they're inherited. . . . Matters are very different. You'll see . . . it will be pretty gay. Fun."

"I ought to ask people in for them."

"You will find, I think, that plenty of people will drive over when they are here. You'll have a party. Robert wants the court made into a hard one as soon as possible—if they keep the place. Soon you won't know it. Things move much faster, you know."

"Charlie was rather proud of the tennis court—it played well. It was kept beautifully."

"It may play better soon. I daresay you'll be over from your new home a good deal during the week-end. . . ."

"Oh yes . . . if they don't want me to sleep there. . . ."

"You'd be wiser to get your own house ready and as smart as you can make it!"

"I shall do that!" she said suddenly, with pride. There was something in Morris's voice and manner—something new—which suggested she wouldn't be wanted much. "Now is my time," she said haltingly, expressing her buried thoughts, digging them up for Morris, "to get to know them. Though I think I do know them. Only we have never talked. . . . After the war, Charles and Robert lived in Town so much—and then—it began to seem as if they had so many invitations for the week-ends—why, even last Christmas they went to Switzerland with a party, for the winter sports. I somehow thought it was then that they met the girls, you know."

"And you've no clue? It will be exciting."

"Yes, exciting. And there will be their children by and by. They'd stay down here."

"Don't bet on it. They may sell the place," he insisted. "It may be handier for them to have houses nearer Town; with a fast train service, you know. They haven't had time to let their girls see it yet. The girls will decide."

"Oh! No, Morris. You don't think that!"

"You'll probably see this week-end."

"I needn't . . . I needn't have moved out. . . ."

"Oh, I shouldn't think that if I were you. The bailiff's house is not attached to the property exactly. You could keep that."

"I see. . . . But this isn't what I thought. I thought . . . that I'd see a lot of them now . . . get to know them as I haven't known them before. . . ."

He took her arm, and they sauntered on.

"The bailiff's little house; and your club will do you fine! You see, Diana, they talked quite a bit to me; after consulting their *fiancées*——"

"Are they really formally engaged?" she exclaimed.

"Probably the rings have been bought now. . . . What Charles and Robert both said was what I have suggested to you. Places a little way out of Town; their practices are too good to throw away—besides, in Robert's case he's with his future father-in-law. . . ."

"Oh? He's marrying that girl?"

"Perhaps. That's the girl he's got now. Wonderful-looking girl. I've seen her photograph—surely you have; she sat for that face cream a lot of 'em sit for. *The lovely Miss April Aubrey says*. . . . They don't get anything for it. But there's quite a competition."

"Robert won't like that!"

"I don't suppose it's for him to say."

"No, of course not," she said, pondering. "And I was believing Charles would settle here!"

"It was mooted, wasn't it? But they had to talk it over with the girls."

They parted, she smiling vaguely. He knew with pity that she had still her initiation to go through. Wife, mother, six children—and still uninitiated! She had practically only seen the pleasant narrow places where Charlie had guided her feet. Dominant in love, leaving her before he expected, he had left her to what she faced now. Morris knew also

that any opposition, any demurring on her part towards their planned projects, would find them stubborn, forceful as their father had been ; more, because they did not love her. At least that overwhelming man had loved her, in his headstrong fashion. Newland meant to tell her about her sons ; and to try to give the sons his guess about their mother. She had none now to fight for her.

The sons-in-law—good men—kept a neutral front.

Then he found himself thinking about the Horse Show ; and the pleasant place where he would give her lunch ; and then she would see him ride ; and she would see the famous actress ride too. How Frances Falaise had persuaded her lover to let her compete was problematical ; but he had an idea that it would be rather like Follett to let her do anything which she did superlatively.

He would telephone for a box at the show ; where he and Diana might be alone.

Chapter 5

AND now Diana was with Morris in the box which she and Charlie had always occupied at the Horse Show. It seemed strangely soon after Charlie's death for her to be here—as it had seemed at the theatre ; only at the theatre she had been with her family—that was different. It was plain that Morris saw her thoughts, for he touched her hand as he handed her a programme : “ I know what you are thinking—but begin. Begin now—as you mean to go on. Don't go back ; don't potter round the old ways and paths. From now it is different.”

“ Not quite yet,” she said. And yet she knew it was different and was glad of it. The old life seemed to be stripping from her like a breaking shell. How strong it

had been! How fragile now! "This is treachery," she thought to herself.

No, it was death. The past was dead.

Morris leaned over her to catch her handbag, which was slipping from her knee. "Don't think!" he said in a low voice. "Charlie would *want* you to enjoy this."

"I shall enjoy it! Oh, to see her ride!"

"Ah, you are looking forward to what many people look forward to."

She wasn't going to tell him once more that it was Irene who was going to ride. That she was to see again that girl with the pale gold mane of hair riding, enchanted; that the colt's pale mane flew with hers in the slight wind.

Always, in her mind's eye the girl and the colt; and the love between them.

"I wonder what she'll be riding, Morris."

These few last days she had used his first name almost always. She hadn't noticed it perhaps—but every time he treasured it. "One of the best, I'll bet," he said. She happened to turn to him as he said that; and it seemed to her that it was for the first time that she noticed his fineness. A spare man, over middle height, looking taller for his hard spareness; riding clothes of the best; he was bowler-hatted as Charlie used to be on these occasions; unless—pre-war—he was top-hatted. And Charlie, too, had loved taking her there.

She rode second in the jumping class for hacks—the golden girl. Diana felt herself bathed in radiance. The lovely mane no longer hung down Frances Falaise's back, but was subdued into a neat roll on the nape of her neck. She was a poem of balance and beauty. She had been announced; and the announcer had said that no doubt the public here would recognise the next rider; the public was asked to refrain from special greeting. . . . Then she rode in and made a completely faultless round at once. And then the cheers could come and she could acknowledge them.

The mother sat forward in her box, longing for a look ; longing to make a little special gesture of congratulation, and to have it understood. Her hand went up ; dropped again. Frances Falaise waved to the packed benches ; bowed slightly to the acclaim from the boxes, and cantered out.

"I went to her flat," Diana said abruptly.

Morris looked at her, not speaking.

"That man was there . . ." she cried.

"I don't suppose a busy star wants to be visited by . . . by . . . what can I call you ? . . . a fan . . ." he said quietly.

"But she is my friend."

"I don't think she would confirm that."

"But you can see—— Morris, I tell you, that man was there. It was intimate—intimate. . . ."

"Very well. It was intimate ; a domestic scene. Forget it. . . . Look ! Here's the best-known rider here—leaving out Miss Falaise, of course——"

So she was quiet. She must say no more. He would only explain to her that she would never find this lost one on whom her heart was set. Kindly, but with perfect logic, unanswerable philosophy, he would explain so that she could not answer. He would, in his kindness, destroy her faith ; her stupid faith which she would rather cherish even if she died without faith's reward. She turned with a sparkle to follow his gaze to the man who came riding easily in, to a round of applause.

She and Charlie had applauded him here for years.

Morris slipped away from her ; and she saw him, mounted on his own hunter.

But now the show had lost its appeal for her. She feigned enjoyment for Morris ; and, alone, saw the second best round of the afternoon. His horse jumped faultlessly every fence but one. . . . He lost on points. They were to dine somewhere early—and go down home by the evening express, he and she. . . . He returned to her ; for her congratulations ; smiling.

She could see Marion and her husband across the great ring, but she did not see Clare, who seldom came up for the Horse Show; she saw Clare's husband, however, though he did not see her—piloting a pretty woman. And while at first she, maternal, began to wonder, even to disapprove, she caught up her critical thoughts; said to herself: "Well, Clare never cared for horses", and let it go. She pointed them out to Newland, who asked: "Shall we go and speak to them?" And then she even had the toleration to say: "No", with a smile. And then she said: "He's having an afternoon off!" surprising herself.

Morris smiled at her. "Nice for him. Clare never cared for horses. I expect it's a bit of business—his partner's aunt or something. . . ."

They left without trying to see Frances Falaise behind the scenes. Diana had come only for that one event; and silently she acquiesced with Morris when he took her away for a glass of sherry in the Ladies' Annexe of his club—the same club to which Charlie had belonged—before they dined and caught their train—the express at eight o'clock down home. He had changed at his club. She had suddenly cancelled her intention to stay up a night longer, and they called at her club for her bag. When they reached home at nine-thirty she kept Morris for a last drink with her. "I can't thank you enough for making me go," she said. "I must do all sorts of things now. . . ."

A bottle of champagne had appeared from his own cellar. They toasted the future.

"I should never have done this—drunk this," she thought, "without a man."

A man dried one's tears.

Charles came to fetch her on Friday evening. She was well-gowned, well-accoutred, to meet her future daughters-in-law; the thousand-guinea diamond brooch, which Charlie had given her for their silver wedding, was pinned on her shoulder. Her grey-gold hair waved beautifully. She had spent an hour manicuring her nails. As she stepped into Charles's fast car she felt glad that she had already taken residence in the bailiff's house; and left the big house to the young people. Glad, because it seemed not unexpected of her; curious as she found that. "I can run you home any time you like," Charles remarked as he turned the car into the drive of Wycombe House. Through open windows she heard laughter and voice calling to voice. Girls' voices. Two girls came out to the front steps as she and Charles drove up. He wasn't in a dinner jacket as he would have been in his father's time; nor was his brother, who appeared for a brief moment at the top of the steps, waving in each hand a bottle of champagne. The girls received her warmly as she came up the steps to the house which, only two days ago, had been hers. "Oh! You're their mother," they cried, clasping her. And the taller said: "I'm April", and the younger one said: "I'm June." Diana gasped affirmatively: "And I'm Diana."

"You're lovely, Diana. Charles didn't tell me. . . ."

"Bob didn't tell me. . . ."

Arms about her, light as feathers, they drew her up, into the house. And it was strange; it was wrong. The house breathed of mourning no longer. The butler—used to staid ways—passed across the back of the hall like a streak of lightning. There was a babel of—only a few—people in the long drawing-room.

The two girls took her light wrap and drew her into the drawing-room. And, there, were some of the younger and lighter-hearted people of the neighbourhood, all talking and all centring on the cocktail bar installed at one end.

A cocktail bar in the house !

She had never imagined such a thing ; the whole house was against such an imposition. Yet the whole house smiled ; laughed ; joked.

The house had forgotten Charlie.

Just as she was wishing that Morris was with her, he came in.

And he caused her that same sort of feeling which she had had when in some puzzlement ; and Charlie had entered the room, taken the puzzle from her with a smile ; and she had not worried with it again. She began to know now the smaller moments of loneliness and strangeness, whereas she had expected only the big ones—dramatic perhaps ; memorable turning-points . . . but now she saw that the big moments dwindled to the measure of the small ones.

She had a sense that she had been leaving life behind her ; and that Morris, entering, had drawn it back.

Suddenly her elder son was beside her with a glass of champagne in his hand.

“ I know you won’t drink cocktails, Mother.”

“ I’d rather have this, dear,” she said, smiling ; she would not remember just now, nor ever tell him, that she and Charlie had always hit it up like two-year-olds as soon as they were away together ; many was the subtle ingratiating cocktail he had had mixed for her in a Paris bar ; and sometimes he had even gone behind the bar and mixed it himself. . . . But their sons and daughters had never known them like that ; never seen them dancing together like lovers—when Charlie could make her forget all that she had left behind her.

“ To all my dearest dears,” she said bravely, lifting her glass. One of the girls came and put her arm round her waist and clinked glasses. It was going to be very gay.

And it was wrong.

It was wrong to do this so soon. Months should have passed before the house should put off its mourning clothes ; changed its muted tempo.

But she drank toasts with "the lovely April Aubrey".

The butler looked quickly at her and away again when he came in with another iced bottle. The men were drinking something stronger; only she and the girls were having champagne cocktails. June mixed the second round, expertly. When she brought Diana's glass she said how lovely the house was; how they'd been looking forward to coming down to it . . . and then Charles looked across at her, hearing what she said; and June turned her talk—startlingly—to the play in which Irene starred.

No. One mustn't think of her as Irene—she was Frances Falaise.

"I thought her lovely," Diana said, smiling calmly; prepared.

"So did we. Just lovely. . . . Of course she can have everything she wants—she's Follett's girl. Everyone knows that—so you won't be shocked. . . ." The girl added suddenly: "I shouldn't say it if it wasn't an open secret."

"Oh no! I'm not shocked," Diana heard herself answer. And she was smiling at April, while her heart wept. Surely it wept? There was an actual pain in her breast. Why couldn't Irene—oh, why couldn't she have gone Clare's way, and Marion's way; been married peacefully and had children? And then she saw April looking at her curiously; as one who knew more than she said, looking at one who knew less.

"Are you and Robert going to announce the date at dinner?" Diana asked.

"Oh no! We'll announce it now if you're ready, dear Mrs. Wycombe. We're all just longing to announce it. We're all being married on the same day, you know."

"I hope your mothers know!"

"Oh, more or less. It doesn't take long to organise when people have made up their minds, does it?"

"No. It's making up the minds. . . ." Diana spilled some of her champagne cocktail. Then April said: "I wonder if

Frances Falaise was married before—oh, you know—before Follett . . .”

“I couldn’t . . . possibly . . . guess. . . .”

“Anyway, I should think Follett could square anybody. . . . Yes, Bob?”

The butler stood in the doorway announcing dinner.

Charles took his mother’s arm kindly. But she knew that he was doing his duty by her; yes, just his duty. When he was married he wouldn’t do it for very long. . . . Not like this. Not in smiling conspiracy about weddings. Not . . . He was doing this kindly; but implacably. Implacable was the word for Charles and Robert. Her mind was busy round the personalities of her family.

Think back—the thought came without her will: In babyhood they had sometimes cried after her, leaning from a nurse’s arms to clutch her with their little feeble hands. She had had to resist them as often as not. In small childhood they had asked her if she and Daddy would play with them. . . . She had had to say this and that. . . . With puberty came the sulks; the wordless criticism of parents. With adulthood the judgment. She had known each successive period of their thinking.

Now Charles asked her to take her usual seat; that is, he stood behind it, pulling out her chair instead of Gray doing it. She put her hand up over her shoulder—oh, the smallest gesture; that could easily be turned into feeling the roll of hair on the nape of her neck. Would Charles squeeze her hand? No. The gesture had to be so turned. It could not now be expected that Charles would interpret the gesture otherwise. None of them expected affectionate display from her. She unfolded her napkin, smiling. She was radiant because of their radiance.

The slight reserve which had quietened her future daughters-in-law at her first entry into the drawing-room melted. Everyone talked. How she enjoyed it! Morris sat at her right hand; and she was still hostess.

Soup was served ; with a glass of Charlie's excellent sherry. This was a purposeful occasion ; and she knew it. All that was not so far settled could be settled now. June appreciated the Georgian silver ; April said : " Such a lovely room." Without hesitation Robert said that she'd like to know the date of the weddings—how did she feel about coming ?

She said that she had already ordered her dress. . . . She smiled as she said it. Then she heard that they had put the date forward ; the weddings could, after all, be quiet. There was nothing to wait for really ; the brides had got together and both thought 'he same.

" Well, you're the stars of the show," she said ; " I shall just be the mother of the bridegrooms. I think it is nice to decide on the same date."

It did not matter what she said. This week-end was to be an assessment of the house and appurtenances—always with the formula of deferring to her wishes. How gladly she remembered that she had given away her rights. . . .

" There is enough for all," she said, " unless you are going to have very big houses—mine is small——" for already this house was not hers ; it had been lifted from her shoulders. . . .

She thought Morris knew more of the last decisions than she did ; and she was right.

" We've decided again about things," said Charles when he had carved the chickens—letting Gray go, away from family talk—" and besides the change in wedding plans there is a change about this too. We are definitely selling ; and dividing the money, Mother. A pretty good offer has just come."

Her first thought was of relief—she did not know why.

The relief was like a blankness of mind. Yes, that was what she wanted for a few hours, a few days—blank mind . . . pretending to busy herself with her small house ; *fitting in* ; tending her new garden ; waiting for Irene. . . .

What did waiting for Irene mean? Waiting for the end of the London run of the play; following her wherever she might go; reading the papers for news of her future movements; her social appearances . . . ?

"I was looking in the family album in the drawing-room cupboard," said June suddenly in her drawling voice—these girls affected a languor all through their briskness, Diana thought—"and I saw a photograph awfully like Frances Falaise. A girl on a horse—bareback. Charles said it was your daughter, Mrs. Wycombe; Irene."

"Oh, my dear, don't call me Mrs. Wycombe——"

"What shall I call you? I think—if you don't mind—I will call you Diana——"

"I should love you to call me Diana, and April too—if she will."

"Of course I will. Thank you," April said. She reached out and smoothed a faint frown which gathered on Robert's forehead. "Don't scowl, love. We're going to be all girls together."

Diana said hastily: "Yes, that is my daughter Irene. She is on the stage——"

"Oh! Charles, you didn't tell me that!" June cried.

"I didn't know she is on the stage," he said sharply.

"She is playing in London now," said Diana. "She is Frances Falaise."

Now she had challenged them!

"Mother, don't," Robert said. "Don't get bees in your bonnet."

"You can't go about adopting actresses, especially if they're famous," Charles added. Under the table Morris touched her hand. She wilted into silence.

The butler came in and handed the vegetables again.

Her two sons suddenly covered the awkward moment with talk.

Gray was most efficient. And Mrs. Gray was cooking a very nice dinner. Mrs. Gray would probably give the girls

ice-cream. . . . But Diana did not understand why the parlourmaid should be absent when there were guests. . . .

Before she could comment, or before anything more could be said about Frances Falaise, Robert took up whatever he guessed she might be going to say. "You're looking for Mabel, Mother. We aren't going to keep any resident staff here at all. After all, we don't want the house except at week-ends. And soon—as I've told you—it will be sold. Gray and his missus"—he looked friendly towards the butler-chauffeur—"are coming with one of us. We're drawing lots for them."

"Oh yes," Diana said. "Oh yes. What fun, drawing lots. . . . Only who will get the early tea tomorrow morning?"

"I shall cope with that," said Charles, laughing round the table. He seemed specifically to address Morris Newland.

"And the next day it'll be my turn," Robert added.

"It will all be coped with," April said, smiling frankly at her future mother-in-law.

So . . . so . . . so the young couples only were sleeping in the main house. . . ? For the Grays inhabited the flat over the old laundry round by the stables.

"We're camping out most luxuriously," June said with a disarming smile.

How pretty they were—the two girls! How foolishly young Diana felt beside them! Just then Robert said:

"The court is fairly good—if we'd been going to keep the place as we discussed, we'd have had a couple of hard courts laid. We're getting an estimate anyway. The Loughlans are coming tomorrow to play."

"Oh. . . . The Loughlans? How nice," she said.

"Yes. They're down for the week-end too. The parents are coming with them to look on if they like," Robert said carelessly.

"Gray, what a wonderful, sweet!" Mrs. Wycombe murmured, smiling up at the servant.

He smiled down at her. "My wife's done her best, madam."

Ice-cream and the first of their forced strawberries ; very lavish.

She wondered what he meant with his respectful smile of complete understanding—because servants always understood ; *always*.

"Your wife must be a wizard ; or is it a witch ?" June laughed up at him.

"We're doing the usual tennis cake for tomorrow, miss," Gray said, lingering by her a moment.

Diana smiled at him.

The "usual" tennis cake ? There was no "usual" tennis cake to make—for Charlie had, more and more, as years went on, deprecated people being asked for tennis. Gray must refer to times—kept secret—when the young ones had been here, in holidays and vacations, amusing themselves as best they might. . . . Rivers had usually come then. Charlie had deprecated this also—and she had said that poor Rivers had nowhere else to go. . . . Well, perhaps they had all enjoyed themselves—though they spared her the knowledge. But it was very certain that few of the adult neighbours had come ; knowing Charlie's feelings.

The neighbours had asked her young ones out, though. That story need not be told. Rivers was a strategist.

"We're both making hard courts for the places we may be buying, Mother," Charles said.

That was all he was going to tell her ? She was ultra sensitive—and knew it. "Yes ? Not worth doing it here then," she said gallantly.

She need not ask the reason for their suddenly taken decision for not using the old place as at first it seemed they would. These quick, sensitive girls had vetoed it. And she understood. It was just how she herself would have decided, in their place. Why live near a mother-in-law if they could choose otherwise ?

She would have chosen the same.

"Let's have coffee on the terrace, if it is all right for you, darling?" June deferred caressingly to her.

"It would be lovely," Diana said. "There's a three-quarter moon; and the sky is so clear."

Was she to make the first move from the table?

She wondered for a moment—then June did it. So Mrs. Wycombe rose and found her arm linked with a young arm. They were nice—these girls!

But she wouldn't stay very late. She and Morris would go fairly soon.

She had arranged nothing—as a hostess would—about the dispositions of the rooms. She had been right! And it was plainly no more her business. Morris came out close behind her; and the brothers came, more leisurely, discussing some plan. . . .

When they were all on the terrace, and Gray brought out the coffee and one of Charlie's cherished liqueurs, Morris settled by her; and she drank her coffee quickly, lingered for a little talk, said good night, and thanked them for asking her. Morris was at her shoulder. "I'll just get your wrap from the hall," he was saying, and going to fetch it. Charles went with them the few steps to Morris's car; and she wanted very much to kiss her son; but did not.

Now she knew better than to do that.

"Nice evening," she said, as they drove off. "I love the girls. So easy; so nice; so *right*."

Behind her the happy group, relieved of her presence, would be already settled down on the terrace. Liqueur glasses would be refilled. One of the girls would make fresh coffee if required—if Gray had gone home. For of course Gray would not wait long—he knew his cues. He had picked up the new cues surprisingly quickly. The four had the place to themselves soon after the departure of Morris and Diana.

It was for a very short while that the young ones sat looking over the moonlit spaces of the gardens ; it wasn't so very lovely after all. . . . All had travelled a little ; holidayed in beauty spots more breathtaking, more sophisticated than this one. The decision to sell, when the good bid had come along so suddenly, was unanimous. They did not want to clip their wings with an encumbrance of the size of this house with its upkeep. And soon Charles had wandered off with his girl into the library—soon afterwards Robert got up and pulled his girl up, keeping her in his arms while he murmured in her ear. They went upstairs, calling out " Good night ! " to the closed library door, which Charles pulled open just to ask if they had locked up. Then he went across the hall and bolted the front door.

Robert and his girl went upstairs arm in arm, quiet with anticipation.

They loved each other very much ; had so loved for nearly a year. It wasn't their first time together—they had been away to Paris—to little Cornish places. They had been walking in Germany, sleeping at excellent roadside inns, clean, sweet places ; small and honest, with eggs and ham and German dishes, and the good white wine, and the local beer and coffee generously served and perfectly made. They had wandered up the mountains with other singing young people ; and Robert had thought the singing simple life wonderful for his girl and him. This was how he liked it to be. . . . Her people never asked any questions ; her people had spoken quite airily without correction of the party of young people whom they were joining—her people wanted to know no more.

Charles and his June were similarly accustomed. They knew their own business. . . . And now that the father's death made it all so easy for them, why, they would really marry and settle down. Knowing each other well. Not like the old folk,—hit or miss.

April was saying to Robert : " I must say, your mother is

a pet. She makes it all so simple for us. She hasn't even looked surprised that Charles has sacked the resident maids. . . ."

Robert wanted to brush her hair. He took the brush. "Well, remember—for your people : you're staying with Mother."

"Did she want to be here this week-end ?"

"Yes. I daresay she did. But now she knows. It's better for her you know. Charles and I have had enough. . . ."

"Sure as sure you don't want to keep the place ?"

"We have this grand offer ; and we're keeping on with our own professions. And that's all there is about the business. Final decision !"

"Is Mr. Newland a faithful adorer ?"

"I hadn't thought so till you said it."

"She could be quite lovely."

"I'd never thought about that either. I know who is the loveliest girl. . . ."

"It's nice to be so used to each other already. It's nice, Bob. . . ."

They laughed, mouth against mouth.

Charles was talking quietly to his love as they lay in each other's arms. "It all went all right. She'll come to the weddings. She's taken it beautifully—the whole thing. . . . Give her marks: It's over. Some women might have palavered. I think she's mainly thinking about my sister who simply vanished over ten years ago. . . . I think it would do Mother good to travel a bit. . . ." But they could not talk about Diana for very long.

"It's our turn now," Charles murmured. And he was right.

Chapter 6

NEXT day—Sunday—in the afternoon, people came over for tennis. Diana was invited again, and she could not keep

away. But she did not play hostess ; the girls shared that, their men concurring as if they expected it. "Don't stay after you get bored, dear," said April, settling her future mother-in-law in a chair on the terrace after a slight hesitation ; watchful of this possible critic. "Charles wants June to pour out—so you'll have nothing to bother with. I expect you know everyone."

Well, in a sense she knew "everyone", but most were the now adult sons and daughters of her contemporaries ; and she hadn't seen much of them. It was because—"Oh ! I won't blame my Charlie for it all," she thought to herself, "It was when Irene went . . . that we quite . . ."

That they had quite given up an occasional party like this, which included some of the young people. That was as they were growing up, of course ; because Charlie always took her away for nearly all the school holidays, and Rivers officiated so nicely . . . so nicely. Her life with Charlie had been like one prolonged honeymoon.

But here were the young people—the daughters and sons of neighbours ; some of whom she only faintly remembered ; some being strangers. And a few parents were about—of course she knew them more or less well ; they were just a little distant at first, today.

Morris did not play much ; he had received a courtesy invitation ; and he had made a courtesy response ; and then, just once, Charles and Robert partnered their own girls ; and there was a happy congratulatory feeling all over the lovely gardens, for the four lovers.

Then June poured out, loving it. You could see how it pleased her. And then the older people spoke to Diana sympathetically, feeling their way with delicacy, about the weddings. She must be proud ! Proud ! But she had not known before how hard it would be.

"Both in London ; yes. I think they all feel it can be a little gayer than if they were married down here—or, as usual, separately from the brides' homes. The reception is at

Claridge's. The girls are wearing real wedding gowns, I am glad to say ; after all, it is *their* day. . . ." So Mrs. Wycombe talked quietly and with a happy smile—so that they all became her friends as they had never felt before ; and she knew it ; and in silence thanked God. For she was now to be lonely ; very lonely. And she had to begin life again ; not take her share naturally in the accustomed way ; as these other older people would take theirs.

A tennis four was picked up again.

"We heard a rumour that you will sell this place. . . . We hope not. . . ."

People wanting to know ; people curious and tactful. . . .

"Yes," she said. "It took some deciding ; but I don't want it—now. And the boys have their own professions, and they're both ambitious. . . . So . . . soon it will go. . . ."

"But we hear you may still be with us ?"

"I think of doing up old Miller's house ; and living there. Perhaps it is a little close to memories. . . ."

"Still, you were both away so much, weren't you ? It makes it easier for you——"

"Yes. That is so." Her chin was keeping steady ; no tears had filled her eyes. But she wished they would stop talking about the house. . . . "I was in London for the Horse Show—that was always a day of ours," she said bravely. "And I had a chat over the 'phone with my daughter, you know. . . . Mrs. Paters—Clare. The children are getting perfectly lovely."

"How nice for you. . . . Did you go the afternoon Frances Falaise rode ? What a fuss the papers made ! The photographs were good."

"Yes. That happened to be the day. . . ."

Someone said : "She was so like . . ." and stopped ; making a very fast set of tennis the reason to turn and clap a brilliant rally. "I didn't see much of her," Mrs. Wycombe answered casually. "Just a quick round—but I saw the first

night of her new play. I stayed with Marion then. She and my son-in-law insisted on taking me."

"So glad you went to the play. You are used to an amusing life and you'd miss it more than we other people down here would."

Spoken so kindly and sincerely. . . .

"Yes, I suppose that's how they have thought of me . . ." she said silently to herself.

"The court's playing beautifully after all," said April affectionately to her, as she stepped back on to the terrace, after the fast set.

Diana went back alone to her house, leaving casually from a solo stroll down the herbaceous border; slipping away. It would be understood—someone might comment; and someone else would remark something tactful. For the Wycombes, the married lovers, had more notoriety than she had guessed—until now—in the neighbourhood. But she would never confide to any woman among her neighbours what was in her mind and heart. She thought only Morris knew; and she made her escape while he was playing in a men's set.

So she entered her new home alone.

But there had been an arrival. From the drawing-room into the neat little hall stepped Miss Rivers. And really she did not look any different from the last time she had seen her; after Irene had disappeared. Quiet and self-effacing; yet now with purpose in her kind faded eyes. The two women looked at each other; Mrs. Wycombe tall and—oh, as lovely as ever, the other thought; and Diana with thankfulness that the other was the same. She did not notice the slight ravages of time, for the same wisdom, the same generosity looked from Miss Rivers' washed-out blue eyes.

"I thought it was time you sent for me," said Miss Rivers.

"So you came?"

"So I came. Haven't you any resident maids here?"

"Someone comes from the village. I haven't staffed yet."

"I had better do it tomorrow."

They went into the drawing-room—only it wasn't really that, and never would be. It had been the bailiff's most Victorian parlour. A small room—no spaces such as she had been used to. "This is a dear little room," said Miss Rivers. "I've been looking all round the 'nouse—I knew you wouldn't mind. I like the bedrooms—I like the low eaves. And the pigeon-cote. You'll be very happy here." She paused; then added: "I didn't write."

"I didn't expect you to write. . . . You've had tea?"

"Yes. And you? With the young ones, of course. Shall I take over the housekeeping?"

"As much as two women want done for them—thank you, dear."

She felt at rest with Miss Rivers. "Take any rooms you like, you know. . . ."

"I've settled on a couple if I can have them," Rivers said. "And I feel very happy to have a home of my own. It's been boarding-houses and so on for some time now. I was a fool to retire—ungracefully. . . . I hope this will last, dear Mrs. Wycombe. I'll do my best."

"It'll last as long as you want it to. . . . I've been watching the tennis," she said. "And beginning my goodbyes to my old garden. Both the boys are being married very soon. After all, they are selling the place."

"A clean sweep is a good thing," said Miss Rivers—"that is, if a clean sweep is contemplated at all. And how do my children look?"

"You shall see them tomorrow—and their wives-to-be. The weddings are to be very soon. They're living conveniently close to London; and as you know—you were at their weddings—Clare and Marion have homes in London too. Of course you'll be seeing them all again at the weddings."

"I went to that play before I came down," said Miss Rivers; "that play with Frances Falaise in."

Diana steadied. "Isn't she . . . just like Irene ? "

"Not at all," said Miss Rivers, steadily. "What a surprising thing for you to say ! I never saw any likeness at all, or I should certainly have thought of it."

"She has a brother over here too ; an extremely successful American," Diana said. "And he's like Bertie."

"Diana, don't," said Miss Rivers.

"I know ! I know ! I'm the only one who sees it. . . . Morris didn't see it either. . . . I went to call on Frances Falaise. . . ."

"That was a pity."

They sat down, either end of a couch, facing each other.

"Why a pity ? "

"Because it is likely neither of those two will ever forgive you. I mean Irene and Bertie, of course ; not these other people—strangers."

"If you only understood ! "

"I do understand. And I know you couldn't help it if you were to keep your husband in a tolerable humour. His jealousy ! It was a vice," said Miss Rivers. Then she added thoughtfully : "And of course you hadn't any money of your own. That would have made a difference in a way——"

"He was so generous with me——"

"Yes. Yes. Well, it's all over. It couldn't be helped . . . only if you'd been able to let the children understand——"

"I did my best. . . ."

"One's best is so poor in those conditions. You see, you managed to look happy and gay all the time. . . ."

"I had to. . . . Perhaps I was mistaken—perhaps I should have been a Niobe . . . mourning. . . ."

"No. Your way was best. But it had to be a poor best. None of them ever had their rights. . . ."

"Charlie would have said that children have no rights."

"I agree it was better that you shouldn't tempt him to say it."

"I knew the best of him——"

"Yes. You are right to remember the best."

"You're judging me, though."

"No, my dear, never. I've never had a man of my own ; only watched other women's men. I've lived with fifteen families as governess or something. I've only known one father who really wanted his children as you've wanted them. They've wanted a son, say, to inherit an estate or great business ; or overpetted some daughter to please their own ego ; but few men who are in love with their wives, as your husband was with you, really like the children coming. There are, as I say, exceptions."

"What a critic on the hearth !"

"Well, my dear, I've been an observer—my rôle, Boys and girls have come to me —after I'd left the families concerned—with their troubles ; and I, an old spinster, have given them advice. Did you mind so much that you didn't feed them ?"

"The doctors advised——"

"They advised what your husband wished . . . the wife seldom knows."

"No. I didn't know that. . . . I never—never—talked it over with other women, you know."

"You never were very intimate with your neighbours ; and you had very few relations. Give up these memories, my dear. They do no good. You may possibly have the chance of advising your daughters-in-law ; but I doubt it. They won't expect a very adoring grandmother or domestic mother-in-law. Diana, make your own life ! It's all you have."

Now Miss Rivers spoke with great earnestness. Her eyes held tears.

At the same time there was a crooked and derisive smile curling her pale lips. "You'll have to go on learning," she said, "as I do. We never stop the lessons. When we stop learning we begin dying."

"I don't think I shall mind dying," said Diana.

"You will mind very much," said Miss Rivers.

Diana smiled. "Which room have you picked?"

"I ventured to go over the house as I say, and I thought you would give me the little end room with the alcove—almost like a private sitting-room—that alcove. And it has a fireplace."

"It is yours."

"I found the linen cupboard. There's a lot of mending to be done. . . . I made up my bed. Really it all looks so homelike."

"Two women wanting a home. How it all fits!"

"Doesn't it? I don't need pay, you know, Diana. I have my life insurance. The pension fell due last year."

"How Charlie looked at it was this way," said Diana. "I quite understand it. Charles is a lawyer in a good firm. Junior partnership. Charlie bought Robert a minor partnership also with a good firm—his girl's people. Charlie thought they could wait for the rest—except for a legacy each. But I thought not. We divided it at my suggestion; my son-in-law helped. But mostly Morris Newland helped. What would I have done without Morris?"

"Just the same without him as with him, I daresay. But," said Miss Rivers, "it is better for a woman to have a man. A man's accustomed to bear the worries his sex has arranged; saving us a lot of trouble, of course. I've been round the garden, dear."

"Well, take what patch you want."

"I can look after the place, especially the garden, when you're away travelling."

"I am not going to travel. Curious as it may seem to say it, after living here all my married life, I've my way to make with the neighbours. Why do you suppose I should travel?"

"I think you'll go to America."

Because Mrs. Wycombe knew she would go to America, when Frances Falaise went to play her present part in New

York, she did not contradict. But she wondered how Rivers knew.

And she remembered how Rivers had always known ; there was never any need to make explanations.

"We'd better get supper," she said, smiling.

"I've laid it in the dining-room."

"I'll just tidy my hair. Quite a little wind——"

She went up to her room. There were flowers on the dressing-table—which she had not arranged there. A bowl of petunias. She remembered that petunias grew lavishly in this garden. Rivers must have put them there.

There was a little wood fire kindled in her grate—she hadn't ordered it. It was unnecessary—but nice. The house was very quiet. A flowering tree was full out, in the garden below. Another, tall and old, blossomed right up beside her window. She leaned out ; twilight was stealthily falling—but she could still see where she would make her own tennis court, beside the orchard where cowslips grew and late fruit blossom showed, mysterious in the dusk.

It was possible—wasn't it?—that, when babies came to those laughing girls she had recently left, there might be a cot beside her bed sometimes?

Grandma would have a baby beside her. Nurses would crowd in, refusing to let Baby sleep by Grandma—but maybe Grandma, cunning, would prevail.

Just once or twice, say. Or when a nurse went on holiday. . . .

If so, it would be the first time, absolutely the first time, that a baby had so lain.

She would get the grandchildren here—Clare's and Marion's children. . . . Before they were all of school age, the little ones could come. . . .

And soon she and Rivers sat at their simple meal, candles alight, so that they mingled their pale flames with the light which dusk was quickly robbing. Rivers had been very efficient during her short time here.

"I'm making a hard court of my own," Diana said.

"Good! And we'll get the strawberry bed going again. It's been neglected. When are the weddings?"

"Next month."

"Next month's nearly here."

"They are to be in London. You'll be asked, of course."

"What are you wearing?"

"Black, of course——"

"With a lot of white touches. . . ."

"I could, couldn't I? And you?"

"Red. I've got it; had it as best for five years. Sign of triumph—triumph in coming back to you. I had never really thought it would happen."

They laughed.

"Why did the boys think of selling up here?" asked Rivers. "I'd have thought they would keep it to come down to; and let the bailiff farm the land."

"I think . . . I think . . . I thought, as I sat with them on the terrace this afternoon, that they . . . they wanted to break all old associations; and more than that; none of them will want to have a house anywhere near me."

"I quite see," said Miss Rivers.

Suddenly, without warning even to herself, Diana broke into tears. The first tears became a fit of weeping which she could not stop. Old Rivers walked away, leaving her; so that when she looked up again, after conquering the first fierce onslaught of her discovery, she was alone; and glad of it. She had never wanted people to know of her great ingrained grief—not even Rivers who knew so much; more than one expected of any unmarried woman.

So Rivers "quite" saw? She had doubtless always known. . . . She had learned quietly the secrets of hearts. But was she a merciful judge? What lay behind her quiet pleasant—always pleasant—face?

Suddenly Rivers returned with a tray with two cocktails on it—nicely iced.

"I brought one for myself too . . . !"

"Of course. I'll be glad of mine."

They stood by the light wood fire, sipping. Every evening, Diana thought, Charlie used to mix her some favourite. They had been happy together often; and always he had thought her happy. It was his life aim to make her so. She knew it. Miss Rivers spoke: "You know, Diana"—she had begun to call her by her first name and it seemed natural—"you must now make your own life. Let *them* see you as adequate; as able to take care of yourself. Don't let them see that you miss what they don't give. By and by there will be the grandchildren."

"That is what I look forward to. I'll have them here in the holidays and give them a happy time. . . ."

"You don't see much of Clare's or Marion's families."

"No, they go with their parents for holidays—"

"As Charles's and Robert's children will do." , '

"No room for grandmothers?"

"I'm only prophesying," said Rivers.

"I shall ask Clare's and Marion's children to stay with me here."

"They may not want to come, you know."

"Then I shall get used to it all, I daresay."

"Diana—if I may call you that. . . ."

"Yes, please call me Diana. . . ."

"No self-pity."

"No. No self-pity," Diana echoed, startled.

"You reap what you've sown."

"Rivers darling. . . . You've never been married."

"No. But I've seen plenty of the difficulties of marriage during my service with several families—and their related families; and their friends. I have watched whole families of children grow up, part; change. & . . . They—many of them—kept in touch with old Rivers sometimes. Lots of them remembered my birthday every year. Some of them have children of their own. . . . Well, it is

usually the children of my children who come and talk to me."

"I don't think Charles or Robert will be good fathers."

"You mustn't see your offspring so clearly, Diana; you mustn't watch. Go away. Open your eyes on fresh people, and places. You are a widow. . . . I read something in the paper this morning which interested me."

Rivers paused, plumping up a cushion.

"What was that?"

"Miss Falaise is only playing in London for three months. The play will open in New York five months from now—that makes about a month for rehearsals there. I was reckoning up. . . ."

A long waiting silence.

"That gives me plenty of time to be at the weddings," Diana said.

Rivers sat quiet, receptive; looking into the fire.

"Charlie and I never went to New York."

"I wonder if it would have interested you. . . ."

"It will interest me very much. I shall see Miss Falaise's play again there. Did you know her brother is over here? He is with some great engineering firm in Philadelphia, I think."

"I didn't know he was here—but then why should I? You have met him?"

"Briefly. The first night of the play."

"What is his name?"

"Why, Falaise, of course."

"Of course. . . . How stupid of me. Only I wondered if Falaise was her real name."

"Yes. Her real name is Falaise."

• "People can't travel easily under assumed names nowadays, after all," said Rivers; "passports and regulations tightening up . . . it is all different, isn't it? I am thinking in terms of forty years ago—silly old woman! But then I

haven't travelled. My families left me at home in the holidays with the children—or I took the children to a seaside place here, as I did with you. Usually, I mean. I was with one family where the parents simply lived for the holidays—and that was when I took mine. Just a month, of course."

In all that Rivers said so simply, Diana knew that she was keeping to a given point between them; a point of understanding and sympathy and knowledge. The experiences of her simple conscientious life were being offered in case Diana should find use for any point of similarity for these other unknown parents. But as she stood, looking down into the fire, her hands holding on to the mantelshelf, Rivers stirred and said it was dark. They had been talking so. . . . Rivers rose and closed curtains, switched on a lamp; busied herself. "I suppose you will want me to stay here if you go to America? I shall get busy with the garden."

"Yes. Yes. Plant what you like. . . ."

Rivers looked at her shrewdly: "I know pretty well what you like."

"I daresay you find me very inexperienced," said Diana suddenly.

"Ridiculously so."

"Say what you please. Say what you think. I shall listen."

"For one thing, you are thinking, with half your mind, about Charles and Robert and the girls you have left up at the house."

"I suppose I am. I know, you see. . . ."

"You would be a fool if you didn't."

"I feel . . . I feel . . . that they offer their contempt in what . . . they are doing. I feel . . . that they are showing me that my opinion counts for nothing."

"In a way they are. But they are bent on opening your eyes too."

"You're rather surprised yourself, Rivers?"

"No. It is what I expect. An old spinster with my chances of experience needn't be a fool. Besides, your sons are doing this almost without motive as far as you personally are concerned. . . ."

"You mean they don't care!"

"I suppose that is exactly what I mean. Life has to be faced—face it. You are generous in paying them in money for all the happiness and love they have missed as children; as growing boys; observant schoolboys. They saw other parents come to visit their sons; they had glimpses of home life for other boys. . . . Diana, it is best not talked of. It is all over; and nothing you can say or do will mend what is broken. . . . Or what was never there."

"'Nothing?'"

"Nothing."

"I know it," said Diana, very low. And for a moment she stood drooping; a broken woman. But then she straightened up. How many years she had straightened up lithely for Charlie—when her heart seemed ready to break her body. Charlie had always been able to overcome her misgiving and her longings. He had merged her so, in him. But he had gone and she had no guardian; no master; no lover. . . .

She said nothing; though Rivers waited expectantly. She wanted her room and silence; sleep. Oblivion. She had never felt so lost; so homeless. So alone. She went towards the door slowly; and old Rivers' gentle voice followed her: "Diana. You are still a lucky woman. You have a home. You are still beautiful. You have such a great deal that many women haven't. Only you must learn again. I can't help you."

• "I don't deserve help," she said slowly; and went out.

She went in the sly moonlight to a corner of the garden which was to become primarily hers; as a hideaway in the large gardens had been hers—though she always thought

that not even Charlie knew it. Only the head gardener must have had an inkling—because, shyly and slyly, he had made it beautiful for her. She had not—looking back—wanted to advertise her craving for the comfort of this particular few square yards of ground ; but each time she went to it—each time, she now thought and knew, when she crept to it, there would be another surprise—either a rare plant to please her, or the arrival of a favourite which she dearly loved—or, rather, which comforted her. She could remember now—when at last she allowed herself clear thought—that the special occasions were usually when the boys had got into trouble with their father. 'They tried—she had thought—to keep out of trouble ; but it seemed that he had to show them, in some justifiable way—justifiable to himself—that they were not wanted. '

But sometimes it was a battle between father and sons—she not able to guess exactly how and why it had started—and then the house was terrible—at least to her—for a thunderous day. She had hoped that as they grew older these punishments would cease to fall ; but the method of punishment altered—that was all. The word penalty fitted it then ; or purported so to do. It was Bertie who began to keep a notebook, labelled : *Punishments by C.W.* She only knew of it when he was gone—when they did not find him anywhere ; it arrived, by post, to Charlie, without a message ; but she, knowing the handwriting, took it from the hall table where the afternoon post was laid ; and went away with it to her cloister—the secret garden.

Bertie had a gift—of writing verse. She could well imagine that it had left the clear-eyed resolute man of affairs who was Bertie now. But on the day when she read what was written by her lost son she was beyond weeping over it. She read the terrible indictment quite dry-eyed.

It was clever ; it was brilliant. It was savage and subtle. Her mind seemed to faint at the realisation of her son's mind. He had been thinking all this ; and was quiet ? She laid it

down on Charlie's desk as he sat in the gunroom, looking over estate accounts. "Read it," she had said in so small and trembling a voice that it did not seem to be her own. She had left him. He had never spoken of the poem; nor did she. She thought he had read it before burning it; but had never been sure.

The subject was never reopened between them. Charlie would have hated to be wrong in her eyes. It wasn't a question of other people—he cared very little for public opinion; but she must think of him as finally godlike.

Then that was all till her sudden illness after Bertie went; when he had said: "You shall have your boy back. . . ." It was curious to her—longing for Bertie—to find Charlie impotent to find and bring him back. Some hidden part of her mind was glad that Charlie had failed. She was proud—proud—of Bertie's disappearance; of his pride; and of his long, yet succinct and terrible, poem.

She didn't wait—then—to go up to London very often. It was lonely—but she had her daughters, hadn't she?

This week-end passed quickly; and her sons went up to their London offices again, driving the girls. All came to say goodbye—her fine young men and their loves. She and these young women were poles apart—but the distance was smoothly paved and the vistas about it charming. They kissed her cheek, and said how they had enjoyed the week-end. No, they weren't coming down again till. . . . She looked after Charles's car, which had brought them all down, and thought: "In this place there are no memories which you wish to keep." Later in the morning Morris came to her and confirmed that the sale was completed.

"I understand Charles is negotiating for a house in Surrey," he said, "and Robert's girl has already looked

over one in Surrey too. . . . They have hedged and hesitated about it. But I understood, when I went up to say good-bye this morning and to see them off, that they now feel definitely there is nothing at all to keep them here."

"I . . . I'll stay then," she said slowly. "Did you like my future daughters-in-law, Morris?"

"Amusing, pretty girls. . . . Robert's girl is clever. Charles's girl is stupid."

"I hope I'll have grandchildren"

"Don't be in a hurry."

"They will be good parents, I'm sure."

"Perhaps like your daughters and their husbands."

"I'm going up to London again. I'll stay at my club. I shall go to see Irene every night. You see, Rivers has settled in; she can stay here . . . and I will roam."

"At least that is something," he said. "It is too early to tell you that I love you and want to marry you; but I tell you so that you will perhaps remember me."

"Morris!"

"Life isn't over for you," he said. "What on earth do you think? You will have to continue to face up to it. Don't give in."

"Bertie was born just before I was twenty. . . ."

Now he knew that she was reliving that far-away time; recounting infinitesimal happenings around Bertie's birth. But he knew also that women are like that. Gently he cut it short. "Live for the future," he said.

"Do you know I have met Bertie too? In London—over from America? But I am no longer his mother; he rejects me."

"Aren't you being melodramatic, my dear?"

"No." She shook her head. "And Bertie is a successful engineer—inventor, I think. He is over here for a famous American firm. . . . My son-in-law knew of it. He was at the first night of that play. . . ."

"In which you insist Irene was acting?"

"In which Irene was starrng. I—I have been to her flat . . . but she has made her own life now. There's a man——"

She stopped.

"Of course. A man who has helped her?"

"Yes. When . . . when she must have needed help." Then she said gently: "If she had had great difficulties—oh, anything—she could have let us know. . . ."

"Neither she nor Bertie would have done that."

"I know."

"Diana, I am terribly sorry. But I think you must do what you feel is best. Don't seek advice any more; don't be overruled any more."

"I shall not."

"Your family have all turned out well."

"My lost ones . . . ?"

He knew she was going from him for quite a long while perhaps. Equally he thought that her seeking would be in vain; always in vain. She would never find those whom she pined to see—except as strangers. "How are you getting on with your house?"

"Oh, well," she said absently. "Dear Rivers will make it all complete while I am away."

"So you are really going up to Town again, to stay? Actually to contact Frances Falaise again?"

"What else am I going for? It may be only for five minutes in privacy—but I must see her once more. I must talk. I can't leave it like this between us."

"There is nothing between you. Get it all out of your head."

"It is there till I die."

"Will you marry me?" he said. "Early days to ask; but here I am for your taking. It might help. . . ."

"No. I think my Charlie has me forever. . . . Dear Morris."

"You need time. I am sorry I spoke so soon."

The weddings were fixed. Decisions had wavered ; but they were not to be at a register office. That comforted her. They were to be as soon as possible—actually next week. And they were to be married together—the two couples.

The brides wore lovely gowns ; billowing veils. Diana was surprised at the number of people asked—nearly all strangers to her ; and strangers to Charlie—could he look down on his tall sons ? The weddings gave her a proper and complete reason for her trip to Town. At least there was money in modest plenty,—she bought beautiful clothes, almost regardless of mourning. She and the parents of both brides were very friendly—June had only a mother. It was the brides' parents who gave the news of the new homes—she pretended to know all about them ; but of course her recent loss and its attendant arrangements excused any ignorance of detail. The brides were cool, charming ; satisfied. But she could not help thinking : *Marriage won't have any deep wonderful surprises for them.*

Foolishly, she had half dreamed of seeing Frances Falaise and her brother at the church—but of course they were not. The relationship—so firm to her—had not been, and would not be, discovered and believed in. And standing smiling, while the wedding cars drove away before the guests began to step into the fleet of cars waiting for them, she could not remember that Bertie's leaving home had ever been discussed with either of her other sons. They had been in their last year at Cambridge and had not seen him go.

Hadn't Charlie said anything to them when they came back ? Yes. So much she had known—Charlie had spoken. With new geniality he had said : “ Wouldn't you chaps like to have a go in Paris and then at the winter sports before you get into harness ? . . . ” And he had sent them with plenty of money in their pockets. He and she were left alone with Irene. And then came that morning when Irene

had gone ; having quietly sold her gift-horse the previous day.

She had thought that somehow Irene had slipped off to follow Charlie and Robert with the purchase price of the colt in her pocket—and this allowed time for her to write to them to enquire. “Don’t wire ; it’s only a silly prank,” had said Charlie, back as thunder. “Don’t let Irene think herself too important. . . .”

Well, Irene was not at Kitzbühel. . . . But how leisurely the boys were in answering ! The boys were absorbed in their ski-ing ; and a great toboggan race in which both—novices as they were—competed.

Morris Newland left the wedding receptions when she did. He came with her to her club. She poured his tea. She said : “Lovely weddings.”

He replied : “Yes.”

And he said that April’s people were nice, but June’s mother rather a tragedy ; and she agreed with him.

They talked a little ; before he put the question which she knew he would put : “And now, Diana ? And now ?”

“And now,” she said lightly, poised over the tea tray, “Rivers and I are putting my new house in order—but I am deciding to . . . travel for awhile sometime. I told you so. . . .”

“When ; and where ? If one may ask.”

“When—I’m not sure. I think I shall go to America at first.”

“You’ve never travelled alone,” he said.

“No. What a confession !”

“Don’t forget me when the time comes for you to go.”

“I shan’t forget you, Morris. I shall write often. I am sure I shall want to write to you.”

“I hear,” he said, “a man told me in my club this morning when I dropped in—that the great Zoe Grey will take

Frances Falaise's place when she has to go back to open in New York."

"Oh," she said.

"It would take a first-rate actress to follow her. I daresay Zoe Grey will fill the bill all right. She's every bit as much of a draw as the American. Miss Falaise opens in New York as soon as possible after she gets home. So I read."

"I'll be staying awhile in New York," she said calmly. "I would like to see a first night there . . . see how it compares with a London opening."

"Very interesting."

"I am very uninformed, am I not?" she asked calmly.

"You have been a very sheltered woman. Now," he said, "you must get out from the shelter and take life as most others have to do."

"Morris! 'Sheltered'! . . . Yes, sheltered," she said slowly. "When Bertie and Irene were lost I didn't even know how to look for them."

"But you think you have found them now."

"Yes," she said very surely.

"Follow your heart, Diana. But keep some sort of place for me."

"Are you going down home tonight?"

"Yes." He glanced at his wristwatch. "And I must go." Then he went quickly; much moved. Soon she got up too, to go to her room; and, as she passed, here and there a fellow member looked up, nodded, smiled at her. She smiled back again; having no memory of them. But she must make new friends; begin to build a new life. She must not be the lost lonely widow when she declared her heart to Irene and to her firstborn son. She must not be an object of pity—this much she knew—but a strong, handsome, vital woman, who was able to cope with her new life. She had had practically no intimates—just acquaintances—and Charlie. They were his acquaintances too. . . . Of course that would be so. She had not kept one old school friend;

they had all married and dispersed—Charlie had not really made them very welcome when they had flitted into her horizon now; and then . . . leave ; retirement ; some reason. They wrote occasionally at first. . . . She also sent Christmas cards and wrote occasionally. It stopped years ago. Now she would perhaps write and say that she hoped they would meet when convenient. . . .

But they would have their grown-up and married children to visit first . . . ?

Again she had a box for the theatre that night. She did not want a lonely stall. And she had been trusting to pick up some acquaintance here at her club who would come with her—and be content to go back to the club without her ; she dawdled on her way out of the big room. A woman was looking after her ; she had the name suddenly : she crossed the room again to her. “ Lady Darroll ; after all this long time ! ”

“ And Mrs. Wycombe, isn’t it ? I was sure. . . . ” The other rose. “ I was so sorry to read in the papers of your sad loss——”

“ Thank you. Thank you. . . . ”

“ Your family will be a comfort to you——”

“ Oh yes. I don’t know what I would have done without them ——”

Find the right words ; hesitations didn’t matter. She went on : “ I rang up and booked a box—lucky to get it—for the Falaise play tonight. Will you come with me ? I have no other guest. . . . ”

It happened that the other member could come. “ I wasn’t able to go on the first night ; I’ll be delighted.”

“ My daughter and son-in-law took me to the first night ; they thought it would be good for me. . . . One doesn’t know how one feels about that. . . . ”

“ Oh, you were wise to go. I’m sure your daughter was right. We don’t mourn quite the same way these days. Shall I be down again about seven o’clock then ? And won’t

you dine with *me*? A quiet corner table that I generally have when I'm here. . . ."

They separated to go up to their rooms.

"I felt I wanted to see the play again; and I'm not often in Town," Diana said when they were in the taxicab, after early dinner, travelling swiftly towards the theatre. "I hear everyone's still talking about it."

How could she keep her voice so calm; so composed? She didn't know—for the whole of her vibrated to her expectations; her hopes that were the echoes of the prayers she had prayed since she had seen Frances Falaise.

"Yes. Everyone says she's just too lovely," the other woman replied.

"Brilliant. . . . But of course I wasn't quite in the right mood!"

"Of course not. How brave you are, though!"

"I am feeling very lost."

"My dear, I so understand; I so remember. . . ."

But now Lady Darroll—older in widowhood—left the sad memories alone. And they were in time to make a leisurely way to the box which Diana had telephoned for directly she got home from her former visit. She had sent her cheque express post without telling any of the family—her sons and those week-ending girls who were to be her daughters-in-law.

She hadn't told Rivers.

For they would all have discouraged her in her fancies. They would all have overlaid the topic with others; they all thought her just a little obsessed over Irene, whom she had lost by her own fault—and Charlie's.

They had no inkling of her heart's torture; Charlie hadn't known the whole of it. When she had seen him suffering over her she had braced herself from the welter of despair which had for some days overcome her; and pretended to believe him. It must have been good acting to

deceive him who watched and learned her every mood—or so he thought. It would have been cruel to undeceive him. Besides, he did not know that more than once she had had the clear thought : “ If Charlie were gone I could have my children. . . .”

She pushed the thought away always. Charlie was not a family man. Literally he did not want to see beyond himself and his own generation ; chiefly represented by herself. And he could make her forget. Was he not the prince of lovers ? Besides, a young woman does not know—so she thought later ; so she thought now, today ; if it has to be husband or children, the young woman had thought, it must be the husband. By and by—she could now remember her vague thoughts of years ago—it will all come right. The children are happy. School is a life of its own ; and they have Rivers. For awhile, doubtless, the children had looked on her and Charlie as two people appearing magically sometimes—interesting for their very rareness ; yes, they had surely looked at them like that ? She could not have said when the change came . . . it had come about imperceptibly that she no more belonged in her children’s hearts ; and neither did Charlie. But Rivers trained them beautifully and kindly in the holidays ; Rivers helped the young things ; Rivers took them to her hungry heart. . . .

They were seated in their box—she and Lady Darroll.

“ I hear she’s wonderful,” her guest was saying again. and she was again agreeing.

It was absurdly comforting to have picked up this fellow club member so easily. She must now make use of all her contacts. She must not appear to anyone as the lost suppliant for people’s help and favours. She must be the poised woman with a sense of direction. When they seated themselves the programme girl had come in ; and as Diana bought two programmes she slipped two coins into the girl’s hand with a note, “ Will you find out if there is an answer, please, when convenient ? ”

The girl slipped the half-crowns into her pocket. "Yes, madam. During the first interval."

.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Lady Darroll was saying, clapping enthusiastically as the curtain fell. "She's wonderful!"

"Yes, isn't she?" The mother's heart swelled with triumph. They looked over the auditorium, and her guest noted friends and waved to them. One or two people came to their box because of Lady Darroll. "Soon they must come because of me," Diana thought almost timidly. And she thought, too, how nice it would have been had Morris been here; shelter for her ineptitude in not having friends; in having fallen out of knowledge of matters of public interest, such as the theatre. . . . Of course Charlie had taken more notice of his two married daughters when they had attracted to themselves good husbands. . . . How irrelevant that was! . . . So now her thoughts twisted and turned back on themselves till in a clearing in her mind she knew that looking back was of no use; no use at all. Forward was the only direction where she might find her new lonely self.

The programme girl brought her a folded note. "I will call back for the answer, madam." Diana opened the folded note and read:

"Dear Mrs. Wycombe:

"I think I remember you rather clearly. It is nice of you to write to me. I wonder if you would care to come to my flat for a light supper. If so, just say 'yes' to the programme girl and if you would care to come please come to my dressing-room, and I can drive you there, and send you home when you wish to go. I can spare a certain time—but the management likes me to keep reasonably early hours.

"Yours sincerely . . ."

Diana said to the programme girl who hovered in the background: "Please tell Miss Falaise the answer is 'Yes'."

She trembled all over.

She waited through the next act, however, before she mentioned to Lady Darroll that she was engaged for supper.

She hardly knew how she sat through the two acts that followed. In her head rang the applause; she clapped automatically, following her guest's enthusiasm. All she cared for was that the play should be over, and she on her way to Frances Falaise's dressing-room. She bade her club friend goodbye mechanically as the final curtain fell after the applause and the curtain-calls; said: "It was so nice to have you. . . ." And in a couple of minutes someone came to take her behind, to the dressing-room.

The dresser opened the door and she felt she had arrived at the end—or was it at the first stage?—of a tremendous journey.

A curtain was drawn a yard from the door across the commodious dressing-room; and she was shown to an armchair just inside. She heard the actress speaking to her dresser as she sat behind the curtain. That voice made music. Diana listened raptly just for its intonation. It had matured; but could one ever forget Irene's voice? It would draw her in the darkness; if only a disembodied sweetness of sound.

It was kind, rich; low, yet with a thrill in it. Now she realised—she remembered—that the thrill had always been there. Oh yes! Yes! This was Irene's voice.

Through the curtain the actress called softly: "Forgive me for keeping you waiting, Mrs. Wycombe."

She called back just as softly that it didn't matter. She felt an intruder. . . .

Frances Falaise peeped through. "Were you in front?"

"Yes," Diana said, from a dry mouth; but smiling.

"Your note was handed to me when I was making up. . . . I've only just read it properly. . . . I didn't gather that

you had come to see the play *again* till I read the note again. . . .

"I wondered if it would be too much to ask for a short talk with you."

"No. I have no *matinée* tomorrow. . . . The rest of this evening is free. . . ." And then she said : "I'm glad you can have a bite with me. It will be fun."

"I am staying at my club," Diana almost whispered.

"One's club is such a refuge," the lovely young woman remarked. Her head withdrew.

"It is sweet of you to ask me," Diana faltered to the curtain. "Of course I must not spoil your rest——"

"Oh, I sleep wonderfully ; and I can always spend the morning in bed. It will be a pleasure for me to have you. . . ."

A knock at the door. In came Follett.

He paused when he saw the visitor. "Haven't I had the pleasure of meeting you before ? Mrs. . . . Mrs. Wycombe ?"

She put up a hand which had suddenly gone limp. He was charming ; easy. He pressed the hand gently. But he was not pleased. "I have asked her for supper and a heart-to-heart," said Frances Falaise, lightly, coming out from behind the curtains, in the simplest of plain short frocks, nearly covered by the chinchilla cape swinging from her shoulders. And how beautiful she looked ! How careless and calm !

"So I am not to take you out to supper ?" said Follett, smiling.

"Just not tonight, darling," she said lightly.

Ah, yes. Lightly. "Of course I've heard that stage people call each other darling and love and . . ." Diana's mind said, rebuking her sudden resentment. She rose.

"I'll drive you both to the hotel, anyway," said Follett.

Then they were all three in his car, driving to that quiet desirable hotel in a *cul-de-sac*, where so many distinguished visitors found it preferable to others in London. And Diana was talking ; it was gay in the car—but suspense had gripped her all the same.

What did she mean to say to this star? How say it? There were years to be bridged; dead thick walls of reticence to knock down. She began altogether to doubt her ability. . . Then they were stopping. Follett parted from them on his floor and the lift went up again.

They were in the flat, the maid opening the door before the actress could ring. They went into the large sitting-room, where a small table stood near an electric fire. Soup; chicken sandwiches; a half-bottle of champagne arriving in an ice-bucket, brought by the maid. Frances said: "Go to bed, Mary dear", and they were alone. Frances opened the bottle expertly, poured champagne into two glasses. She raised hers with a smile. Diana clinked her glass against it with a hand that trembled so much that she faltered an apology; tried to say something; stopped.

"I hope you take supper?" the hostess asked.

"I don't really. Thank you. I dined at my club before . . . But if I may sit with you . . ."

Frances Falaise asked frankly: "What are we celebrating?"

"A reunion," Diana whispered.

They both drank; set their glasses down. Frances turned to her jellied *consommé*. The slender white hand was firm on the spoon; while Diana shook in every nerve of her body. "You are so charmingly pertinacious," said the actress, smiling across the table. "What can I really tell you that you want to know?"

"Have you . . . have you . . . a mother?" Diana asked stupidly. And she knew she was stupid; but also that the other understood her; every thought in her urgent mind was too clear; too clear. That she knew; but could not care. This occasion might never come again. Here she was, in a position of almost unheard-of privilege, alone with—now she had assimilated this—possibly the most famous young American actress of the day, after the very slightest of acquaintanceship.

"No. I have no mother living. Except a very delightful woman who has played mother to both my brother and me."

She reached out for a sandwich and was eating it with appetite. But very soon she had finished ; wiped her fingers on a fine napkin, pushed the table away on its wheels. They faced each other beside the fire.

"You are so like a daughter I lost !"

"She died ?"

"No.... No.... I... lost her."

"So you want me to tell you my story."

The actress laughed.

"It is really wonderful," said Diana very quietly, her hands gripped on her knee, "just to sit here and hear you and look at you."

"But I am afraid you cannot look long...."

"If you would tell me anything—just something...."

Then Diana knew that in this poised brilliant young woman she met a woman of the world ; a wider world than hers had been. Supplications were out of order. One did not make such appeals any more than, down at home, among her neighbours of the county, one could make heartfelt appeals to them. The appeal, yes. But not from the breaking heart. No embarrassments : "I leave it to you," Diana said with a difficult smile.

She had noted how softly the room was lighted till this moment—and Frances Falaise, with a flick of her slender fingers—yes, those were Irene's hands—put out one of the lamps.

"My favourite brother left home before I did," said Frances, lovely in the soft light that was like a golden gloaming. "But we found each other. We had always been special friends. You know how in largish families two are often special friends ? I left home soon after he did. We never went back."

A silence. "In fact we shook the dust of what was called 'home' from our feet," said the actress impishly.

Diana did not speak ; did not stir. There was such a hun-

ger in her for understanding that she would not have dared to interrupt with any question. "We found each other in London," Frances Falaise said. "Of course he had left a clue for me. I went away very early one morning when our parents had left for Italy—and even our old governess was called away for a day or two." She paused, reflecting. "Our father had had a terrible row with my brother before they left . . . and next morning my brother had gone. Only I knew where. I had money from . . . something I sold. I took what clothes I could carry. I got a lift in a stranger's car anywhere he was going—he told me his direction, and I asked to be put down at a station fifty miles away where I wasn't known. We met in London—my brother and I—and he had everything all ready. He had got copies of our birth certificates from the county town near our home. He had our passports. . . . He was nearly twenty-six and I was nearly eighteen. . . . On the ship in which we presently sailed in the steerage for America a stewardess in the first class went sick. I was taken on as stewardess for the voyage out and back—only you wouldn't have expected me to come back—would you? I applied through one of the stewards. 'I'll say I know you!' he said. Adventure; Adventure. . . . I needn't go into the details of all our precautions. . . . Bertie had altered my age to twenty-one on my passport very cleverly. . . . We might have failed—been caught—only by the time our parents came home and our governess had returned and become anxious when she found I wasn't really staying with my married sister—as I wrote her I would—well, I'd been many things in many places."

She paused. "America seemed a wonderful country for the young. The young adventured always. Almost needless to say I came to grief. You realise I am leaving out many things; things I don't want to think about. . . ."

Diana trembled.

"No. . . . No. . . . Tell me all. . . ." Was that her own voice whispering . . . whispering: "Tell me all. . . ."?

The actress smiled ; finished her little meal ; rose and put the tray out into the hall. Now they were really alone ; shut in ; the whole enclosed world here was for them only. But they were not close ; they were strangers.

The Story

The girl was fresh to adventure ; she was not lonely—for adventure companioned her. If she missed anything, it was her horse—that pale colt which she had communed with, who understood her as she understood him. It had been hard to sell him.

But there was Bertie, her most beloved brother—the same thoughts in both their heads. How easy it was ! Bertie had money saved ; he had done many amateur but expert jobs for that engineering firm twenty miles away in the county town. They had taught him out of interest. She had no idea he had so much money. . . . But then he was a genius. Their father had turned him out till he had “apologised” for insolence ; and he had taken their mother away. . . . She had heard Father say urgently but tenderly to her mother “It will do him good. I intend him for farming—my eldest son. . . .” The girl had thought, storming to herself : “Your intention ! He has intentions too !” The father knew nothing of what Bertie had done. . . . The kind of degrees he had taken . . . his progress in the Army. Well, he hadn’t been told. All he thought was : *When he gets home he belongs here to me ; if I say so.*

How easily she had sold the lovely colt too. . . . How easily she had gone away in the night with hand luggage, leaving that necessarily lying note for dear Rivers : “I’m going to Clare in London. . . .” Then she had written to tell Bertie how she had done it, he had sent a telegram for her—just on the eve of their sailing in a crowded steamer—a telegram from Glasgow to bewilder them. A “mate” at the engineering firm, just going on holiday to his people up

there, had sent it for him ; and he kept his promised silence—that was a very remarkable thing. The silent Scot ! Bertie always called him that. . . . So they provided a red herring for her trail ; and his. Then they were in the ship, a fast ship—a four-and-a-half-day ship ; with a crowd of poor people travelling anxiously, clearing the customs ; off the pier ; away into New York ; the brother and sister.

The miraculous arrival ! He had a letter from the engineering firm which had befriended him ; he'd saved back pay. He didn't use his Army rank, but he had money enough to allow them both to land. Just at first he watched her ; then distance parted them. She was proud ; she would not make herself a burden ; besides, now she had discovered that she had that quality—beside her fey beauty—which drew men. Had she wished to, she could not have changed that. As a matter of fact she used her quality.

But her experience did not match the fey beauty—mere gift of Nature. . . .

She and her brother were parted by far greater distances than the whole size of the country they had left. . . . One felt differently ; one thought differently ; one became conscious—if one were frightened especially—and one was—of danger. Other girls talked freely. If a girl got a man to help her along . . .

The men were there.

Low types the girls had seemed to her till she got used to her new ways of living ; then she knew them as fine friends ; ruthless in their ways of life—how generous ! How kind ! . . . How wise to the dangers of which every working girl should be conscious !

However, following their tuition, she was never without a job ; always in restaurants or sometimes small cafés ; one changed one's luck. If the proprietor of such saw one turn down the attentions of a good customer he was down on one hard ! One had to understand. If one were not clever in handling such a customer, one was soon out on the

street. . . . She hadn't stenographers' training: she started on that; night classes: but time did not run to it, nor money. . . .

The actress went on quietly, and as if carelessly, with the story; lighting a cigarette; finishing the cigarette; lighting another.

The girl grew clever—but not clever enough.

The other girls would tell her how; she listened. They had a store of knowledge and they shared it with the English kid. They liked the young fellow who turned up once or twice and was presented to them as her brother. His name was now Bertie Falaise. "But, say, your name is different. She's not called Falaise—no kidding. Tell us."

Bertie had explained something to her, but not at all.

"We're stepbrother and sister really," she had said. "Different fathers." And as she spoke the lie, she wondered where Bertie had got that new name from—that new strange name. "But my name's going to be Falaise," she had said, daring it; "he's arranged it." For she had wanted to be the same as Bertie now that she had seen him again.

It happened on early-closing day—for it was a Sunday. They opened for their regulars for the midday meal—and some lingered and had to be chivvied off.

Bertie was waiting for her.

The regulars—all men—no girls today—wanted to linger because they suspected she was going off with the newcomer when she had refused them. All but one of them left at the manager's brusque dictum; but one stayed, pulled off his coat and fought Bertie. The manager went slowly to the door and closed it. He shuffled them out to the back, pushing them. "There y'are! Fight there! And you, my girl, get off home with you; side door sharp, before they gits back!"

"He's my brother!" she cried.

"I know what you both are, and what you want," the proprietor said. "Get out and have it, but not in my place!" However, he didn't mind a fight if the doors were locked. Then somehow they were all in the smelly back room full of stuff—cooking pots, stove nearly red hot—an old Filipino dancing out of the way of the fighters, and waving his filthy dishcloth.

The Filipino cheered in his cracked voice and prepared to enjoy the fight. She backed into a corner protected by a table stacked with dirty plates, and watched Bertie with terror and exultation.

Exultation—for she saw him for the first time as a fighter. And so she remembered—right away in another life—a life not so hot, cruel or exultant as this moment—that he had been medium-weight boxing champion both at his school and university. . . . Not that she remembered his interrupted university career—for he had come home after the war saying to his father's face that he would not go back.

He had been kept too short of money. Humiliatingly short. Had they been poor he would not have complained; but it was his father's antipathy that kept him short. His father had taken a dislike to him early in life. It was so in families—so he had been told when he grew older and, during his last term, with other men, there had been a discussion group—not dignified by such a name—they would have laughed at that. Families had been exhaustively discussed—not as entities so much as separate personalities. . . . "They get tired of you," had said one pale youth, hugging a knee as he sat doubled up on a low pouffe.

"I'm damn tired of mine," Bertie had said. He was shortly after to refuse to finish his university course and to spend his time in the engineering firm which had encouraged him before. He would never forget this firm, and what the boss had done for him. A meal in the hospitable little house adjoining the premises, good plain food and talk, and the money they let him earn there, and the knowledge they gave

him—with the free run of their by no means inconsiderable shops ;—and then his service in the Royal Engineers—had sponsored his start and rapid rise in the new world when he and she had found themselves almost broke, but glorious, in the strange country. . . .

All this lay at the back of her mind—so she said now. It rose in her mind ; unforgettable while the fight whirled to a close. Bertie had prophesied to her during many long talks in the woods and fields around that place which for a long time she had called home—though now she tried to abjure it and banish it as he did.

It was Sam the manager who called the fight off. He had loved it—he had lusted with the fighters—there was no doubt of that. But he didn't want a fight to the death such as these two young men had started. There was murder here. . . . “ No moider roun' my place,” he cried, and thrust between them at risk of his own body and bones. He was flung about in the continuing battle—but he stopped it. He screamed and yelled. He ran the young Englishman's opponent out of the door of the café, and threw him on the pavement, slammed and locked the door ; closed the shutters inside. And then he came back to the young folk whom he had left in the backyard. “ He daren't squeal,” he said, with a backward jerk of the head. “ And now ; come here, youse.”

Bertie stood up straight, slim and limber. He called the proprietor “ sir ”. It was a clever thing to do. The proprietor said he guessed he was British too, like his sweetie. . . . They did not deny this idea, since the proprietor found it agreeable ; or seemed so to do. Anyway, the sister-and-brother story would have been laughed off. “ You'm got some valuable muscles,” said the proprietor, feeling Bertie's biceps in the friendliest way. “ Me, I don't care to see a muss ; I like to see it scientific ; I guess you're some boxer.”

"I boxed for Cambridge."

"What's Cambridge? We got a Cambridge somewhere in this big county."

"It's just one of our universities. I was there a year before I went into the army. We have a boat race against Oxford University."

"Wal, guess I've heard of that. Now you two's better outta this place o' mine. Good luck to you. This gal got anywhere to go?"

"She goes along with me, sir. And thanks for the fight." Bertie had always had a way with him if he chose to use it. He used it now. The manager thawed. They shook hands. For the girl there was a fatherly kiss; and from somewhere they had not till now known existed—a top-floor bedroom—a blowsy woman appeared, and kissed her too. "Sweeties, huh?" she said, having gathered so much from the proprietor. "Well, you'se better be getting home wherever you belong. Good night, and it's been nice seeing you."

This was dismissal. And soon she would have nowhere to go; for she owed her rent; she knew her few belongings would be kept back for that. Outside on the pavement she told Bertie so much. "I've caused trouble here, my dear," she said—and how much older she sounded since he had last seen her—his little sister! "I think he won't want me back tomorrow. He'll give me five dollars and say so."

"You've quit now. Never mind. You're with me."

"But my week's wages?"

"Never mind that. You're coming along with me." But she said she was provided for. . . .

Frances Falaise laughed quietly and lazily now and again while telling the story.

Diana Wycombe had managed to lean back quietly in her soft chair while she heard all this ; and more.

Oh ! more ! more ! more !

Then the narrative went on :

“ You’ll gather my brother and I never made enemies. He had instructed me about that when he first left me. ‘ Never make an enemy,’ he said. Very wise, don’t you think ? ”

“ Very wise,” Diana replied, faintly.

“ My home—I am sure it would seem to you a terrible place—was at the top of a tenement house in a slum. I wish not to remember the names of streets and numbers of houses now, unless they are useful—the memories, I mean. And I daresay that—if I ever write my memoirs—I shan’t mention them either. I shall remember a nice little, clean little farmhouse in Tennessee. . . . All my folks being dead, except my brilliant brother. It will make a charming memoir—Bertie as a brother knight-errant, always appearing just in time ; always watching little sister—even if from afar . . . the hired help working the little farm, with my childish labour. . . . I think the book would be called *I Had No Parents*—unless the publishers like a shorter title. . . . But that is for the future, isn’t it ? I haven’t time to think of trifles now.

“ But I’m sure you’ll be surprised—if you are still interested—that I never went with Bertie to wherever he meant to take me. He gave me the address when I wouldn’t come, and I wrote him almost a success story—at least as if I had success just round the corner in spite of my tenement room. For something had happened to me that I haven’t told you now ; and that I did not tell him.

“ I was going to have a baby.”

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Diana leaned forward ; trembling.

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"I knew it during that fight. I had been fearing ; I had been almost sure ; and I didn't know where to go. Bertie went away ; giving me an address where I could find him—the name of the big engineering firm where he was working ; and learning. Now he's a director ! He's got the most important letters after his name now ! But he gave me another address too—the address of a Mrs. Falaise in Connecticut. I wrote it down carefully ; and I got another job—near my last one ; working in a rival café. Rivalry is a great card to play—I had learned that. I learned it when I got my baby too—I shall tell you about that, since you want to hear my story."

"*Yes. I want to hear.*"

So Frances Falaise went on.

Yes. She had fallen in love. At least she thought it love in her circumstances, with few chances of pleasure and friendship. Naturally, she had acquired a boy-friend. Nice ? . . . What was nice ? . . . He was young and passionate ; he took her to Coney Island ; and also to little cafés for a meal sometimes. He had a room—and this was what she valued most—his friendship and the fact that he had privacy, and a violin ; and that he played to her. In fact he had an apartment—one room and a bath—at the very top of a tall apartment house which was cheap, and asked no questions so long as the tenant paid, and lived quietly. And now she really did give up her own room. From his one small window they could glimpse the Hudson, flowing by, enchanted river, with tiny shipping far below ; busy shipping ; noisy shipping ; gulls flying in from the sea ; sky so great as you leaned out of that window. And she loved love. Yes. She was no victim—and she thought she had been clever enough. . . .

But she had not been clever enough. And the day he could not but guess it her lover left ; he and his violin ; his

few pots and pans—the table and chair belonged to the house ; as did the poor blankets ; the room had never seen the refinement of sheets. . . . “ *I thought he loved me ; when he knew, I thought we would marry ; but he left me . . .* ”

There were great lessons to be learned ; the girl learned them. One was to stand alone. That was the biggest and bitterest.

“ *But my youth at home was really, in a sort of way, very good training for it. You are shivering,* ” Mrs. Wycombe. *Come closer to the fire. . . .* ”

The girl did not want to go to hospital when the time came that she had to quit her work ; when she couldn't pretend to hide her condition. Then as—near the very end—she lay thinking and worrying under the blankets—for warmth had to take the place of food often—the landlady came in when she had time—a tap came on the door. She called : “ Come in. ” And in walked a rather tall lithe man, grey-haired ; whose portraits she had seen—she was certain—in the papers from time to time. He carried flowers. And as he came forward he looked about him. Then he sat beside her. And he said ; closely observing : “ You are in pain ? ” “ Not much, ” she answered. He said easily : “ I was talking to your brother about you only yesterday. ”

What was yesterday ? Why, a Sunday. . . . “ I was down on a farm belonging to Mrs. Falaise, ” he began again conversationally. “ Your brother does not know this address of yours. But I have been following you up since I came one day into Joe's place down by the docks ; and you were serving there. ” She did not speak ; only looked at him. And suddenly pain came again. And she knew what it heralded. The child was to be born to her, alone here ; perhaps in the dark of the night ; she would not be able to get up and heat water ; and the little scanty clothes she had been getting ready were not finished.

"One never knows what one may discover in places like Joe's," the man said. But she knew that he had again observed her hidden pain; he might even know that the muscles of her legs had tightened; that the sweat broke out upon her; that under the blanket her hands were pressed on her body. "I discovered you. When you left I found you again—Joe told me where you were—or rather he told my scout. It is difficult to get lost, my dear. That is, if experienced people mean to find you. Then one of my experts went to watch you at your next job—which you left to stay here for a child to be born. . . . Well, whatever comes of this interview your child should be born in a pleasanter place than this. . . . You must be moved tomorrow. I shall make arrangements. We shall talk of the future when you are well."

She looked at him steadily. There was a fear in her—that the baby might be taken away. She had come to love it. Her close little companion; her own. She had come to adore it. She had made up her mind that it should be hers, and no other's. She lied then: "It will be a few days yet. I shall stay here tonight; and be ready to go tomorrow. But I don't know who you are. You will have no rights in my baby. I want my baby. I shall have it safely. . . . Something of my own in this great terrifying new country." Then she asked him to go. It was plain, she said, laughing as the pain came on, that she would be safely parked till he made these arrangements with her brother. She said she was all at sea; and so she was. "Tomorrow I'll go to hospital if I can."

Then she wanted to know—since he did not go away, but watched her—what her brother had said. Her brother did not know anything of this.

"If your brother had known," he said, "he would be here himself, making all arrangements for you. Your brother is a very grand fellow. But if you are all right for tonight—I shall have a few words with the landlady—she will do all

you want ; and she will watch over you and bring you something nice to eat. She did not hesitate," he said, laughing a little, " she took her cue very well." He stood looking down on her for quite some seconds ; but she showed nothing more. She smiled ; colour had come into her cheeks.

" Come back tomorrow," she said pleadingly, half laughing too. " And thank you . . . thank you. My brother is very fine indeed."

When he went away, however, she had known that he was not in laughing mood although his lips smiled. And from " Joe's " she recalled, between spasmodic pains, his name. *Follett*. She saw it imprinted on the air. She had surely seen his photographs ? *Follett* ? Yes. The great theatre man.

Why had he followed her ?

And then the landlady came in ; and from her, too, she concealed the great tear of pain which ripped down her body ; she hid it by movement in the bed ; changing her position ; sitting up and bearing down. The woman watched her. " Your gentleman friend left money," she said jubilantly. " I'll look after you all right for a day or two. It's not due yet, is it ? "

The girl said : " Another month."

The woman said : " We must be careful then. We'll watch it."

She was different now that *Follett* had been. She produced sheets ; and a portable electric heater ; a tray that was appetising.

Saying " I'll be back ", the woman went. Then the girl ate her good supper ; and lay back for a few minutes till the pain came at her again.

The landlady fetched the tray when it had passed like the other pains. She gave the girl a long look : " Another of the pains, love ? "

" No. No. . . . I'm just tired. I'll go to sleep."

"I'll tuck you in. And see. If you want me, hop out and shout. Since you got Mr. Follett looking after you, I'll look after you too till it's time for you to go wherever you're going."

"I shall stay here! My rent is paid!" Yes. She had paid her rent for a month ahead. She didn't want to move now; to search again. Here was a roof to which she had a claim for as long as she had paid. She knew, anyway, that the baby would be born before she might have to leave.

But she hadn't reckoned on it being so soon. Really, her figure hadn't shown that much. . . . She had been careful about her few clothes—the landlady was speaking from the door soothingly. "You'll do what Mr. Follett says, ducks, if you're the wise girl. Lucky you are to have him. . . . Is it his?"

She wasn't understanding very well: "His?"

"Your girl?"

"No?"

"Thought not—or you would not be here. Well, tomorrow you won't be here either. But I'm not worrying. He'll see me right. And you right, since he's taking an interest in you. What's that? A pain?" She put the tray down. . . . The girl stilled herself. How she did it she did not know—but the landlady was so immersed in her own speculative thoughts that she left the room without noticing the girl in the bed again. The girl had gone down, down, under the covers as if she were going to sleep; under the covers she sweated out her pain and it passed; when she came up again she was wet with sweat and shaking all over.

She was afraid of one thing; that if she passed into other hands they would—somehow—take the baby away from her. Say it died in birth; say this; say that. But it belonged to her alone.

She had never guessed she would think like this.

Towards morning light the baby had come. She had bitten her lips, bitten her arms, clenched her fists, but she had not

screamed—indeed, the scream that rose to her lips, when the birth happened violently, fell away in a faintness. She felt the afterbirth; she was aware that something had to be done—but what? Then there was the landlady, saying: “You shoulda called me. There was me lyin’ awake wonderin’ . . .” But it was evident she had waked from a good sleep. “Now then, I’ll have to get me scissors. I’ll have to tear up me old towels. You lay still and never mind what happens to anyone but you. . . . I don’t know what Mr. Follett’ll say. . . .”

Then a wise neighbour came in from next door—the landlady had tapped for her. And while Irene—she wasn’t then Frances Falaise—lay in a half-faint this woman had poured brandy down her throat; they had cut and tied the tube, cleared away the mess, slapped the baby; they had put milk to heat and called a doctor.

They had opened a drawer which she locked when she was out, and found a baby’s nightgown—the only one she had been able to make—her purse was all but empty. She had come down just to bare money saved for food. . . . And into the room walked a doctor, justly annoyed that he had not been properly apprised. But he was not angry long when he heard of Follett; he had stroked the mother’s sweat-wet hair away from her brow, and smiled at her and said: “All right now. Give up.”

So she gave up.

A nurse came in. An ambulance waited below.

Follett was there.

The nursing-home was on the heights above the Hudson. Through her windows the sky looked so clear and blue and specially high. Her room was filled with flowers by the time of her arrival. She heard Follett say, during the dreams of the sky and flowers and professional welcome, that she was to have her baby’s cot in her room if she wished. She did so wish. She nursed her baby too. She had all things her own way. “This is a time of joy,” said Follett above her.

So it was a time of joy.

Each day Follett came to see her ; and one day soon he brought a woman with him. " You can have no idea how lovely she was and is," said Frances Falaise, smiling at Mrs. Wycombe.

The visitor's name was Falaise. Already she knew Bertie. And when mother and baby could come they were to convalesce with her in Connecticut.

" Did you think it would have been nice—happy—to stay with your own mother to convalesce. . . ? " asked Mrs. Wycombe faintly.

" No. I knew it would not be nice—in those circumstances or any other. . . . You see, my father was alive."

Now Irene had known the joys of a loving home. She told the listener all about it. Mrs. Falaise took her as a daughter, because Bertie had already taken her name. Follett approved. Sitting beside the young mother in the gardens—so beautiful—Follett told her this would bring her good luck. She saw for herself, of course, that Bertie was—or had been—in love with Mrs. Falaise himself. He was—or had been—her lover. . . . She had been his refuge. But, also, she who became in this garden Frances Falaise understood that would pass. Mrs. Falaise was not a woman to cling to youth ; she let the years roll by and counted them. She had let this late love come ; and she let it die. So it had been. That was nine years ago.

In this garden Follett rehearsed her for the part he was going to give her in a new play. " I followed you and had you followed from the first time I saw you," he had said. " I saw that you had already suffered. You had already learned. You had worked ; you were poor. You had already experienced the moods and storms of life. You have survived the

biggest storm. Now I will show you how to reign. . . . You are beautiful—but you needed the storm and the suffering.”

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In New York she had had a wonderful first night.”

She had played in four plays since then—this now playing was her fifth.

The story was told.

The flat had fallen very silent. Her daughter, beautiful stranger, looked at Diana calmly.

“Of course,” said Diana, with effort, “all you tell me is intensely interesting. Needless to say, the public . . . does not know. . . .”

“The public has been told what it may know. But I assure you that the whole would be a very popular story. It would not harm me at all . . . if you were thinking that.”

“No. I was not thinking that. But how quickly you told it all. . . .”

The actress smiled. “All? Did you say ‘All’?”

“Where is . . . if I may ask . . .”—“my grandchild” was almost out from Diana’s lips. She substituted . . . “your son—now? I mean when he is not—not with this wonderful woman—she must be wonderful, I think——”

“He is at school.” She named a school where the young sons of the elect, of millionaires, went. Of course Diana did not know it; but she guessed. “He shares my life,” said Frances Falaise. “He is always at my first nights; he is a good little boxer and keen on games. In the holidays he is with Mother. If I’m not playing, I’m there all the time. If I am playing—then for week-ends. . . .”

“‘Mother’!”

Diana cried it out. Frances Falaise replied : " With Mrs. Falaise, I mean."

The actress held the champagne bottle to the light—it had a glassful in it. She poured it into Diana's glass.

" You look tired, Mrs. Wycombe."

" I am not tired. I have heard a beautiful story."

" I am glad you think it beautiful, because it is. We are all very happy."

" ' All ' ? "

" My son and I ; Bertie ; Mother ; Mr. Follett. He is so often with us that I include him, you see. Mother and he are very old friends, as I think I mentioned. If not, I mention it now. At one time—long ago—they were lovers—you would hear it if you talked to them, I daresay—so I don't hesitate to say it. You would understand, I know, that one does not think about it. It has passed. One does not mention it except that . . . now I am mentioning it for a purpose. It was their affair. But now . . . I insist you are tired. I will ring down for a taxi."

Mrs. Wycombe watched her across the room. All the puzzling things she might have kept for the sleepless night watches, which could have been her lot this night, she thought swiftly now. Changes of name ; legalities ; passports . . . nationalisation. . . . Well, all had been done. . . . Couldn't she cry out that her children mustn't reject her so easily as this ; could not pass to others' keeping as if they had never belonged to her. . . ? Then the good sense which usually actuated her actuated her now. She thought that all the formalities would have been done by routine, by expert experience. The adoptions. . . . She stood up : and said as Frances Falaise turned from the telephone : " If you would once say you remembered how I crept into the nursery and you—a small mite—turned to me. From your nurse's arms you reached out to me, and clung to a scrap of my dress that you could reach. Two neighbours—women—were there to see you—and one said : ' They generally cling to their

nurse. . . . Baby wants *you*. . . .’ . . . It stayed in my heart, just that moment of time—right until you had gone away years after. And then, after that, it was still there, rising whenever I thought of you. Just that one little moment stands so clear.”

“Dear Mrs. Wycombe, please keep your lovely moments ; but you must not, for your own sake, link them with me.”

“You . . . you insist you are not my daughter?”

“I am not your daughter. I have no mother except my adopted one.”

“Couldn’t you tell me something about your son?”

“I have, of course, photographs of him. Haven’t you noticed them about the room?”

“Of course. Of course. Only I have looked chiefly at you.” She rose and went, one by one, to the three photographs of Frances Falaise’s son. He was like that unknown absconding father? Where in him was Francis? One showed the boy pulling his light canoe down to a lake ; he was about eight ; in swimming trunks only. He laughed up over his shoulder at the photographer. There was an earlier one on a pony. “He inherits your love of riding,” said Mrs. Wycombe wilfully and stubbornly. “You loved horses since you were a little thing.”

“They were beyond my purse till recent years,” said Frances Falaise.

How smooth her voice was ! How calm and frank her eyes !

“But you remember your chestnut colt?” said Mrs. Wycombe, still wilfully and stubbornly.

Frances rose to telephone.

Mrs. Wycombe’s eyes devoured her. She said insistently ; “Not the colt then ! But the times when you tried not to go to anyone else : knowing me for Mother ! If you would only once remember that there were moments when you and I clung together—oh, there were those times ! There were ! There were ! Oh, please——”

But she could not go on before that calm, gay, wise face

approaching her again across the room, the telephoning done. She would have liked to say : " I have—a treasure—your christening mug—you had two ; I have them both. Take one. I have your little ivory teething ring. I have the lovely little Georgian silver spoon and fork that your godfather gave you ; I take them out and look at them ; no one sees me ; but I do. Since you went away, I put them in my jewel case ; in deep. The secret drawer. No one knows—but I did. . . . They *are here*."

Disowned, she could not make herself say : " If you had come to me before you sold the colt . . ."

But how could Irene have come to her when she was half-way between England and Italy with Charlie ? They were on their leisurely travelling ; and Rivers kept watch. . . .

Besides, she stood in this room with Frances Falaise, the famous American actress ; not with the lost daughter.

The telephone rang again. The taxi had come promptly. Could she kiss her daughter ?

Lithe young hand met her cold one even as she wondered. A gracious handshake. " I'll come down with you."

" Oh, please don't."

" Oh, I must. So nice of you to have come."

She would have demurred further, but she wanted this daughter beside her till the last moment ; till she must drive away. And then . . . what more excuses could she make for seeing her again ? If she wrote, would her letter be answered by anyone save a secretary ? She knew that would be all. In the lift she could not think what to say. Thanks were over. They stepped out. Frances Falaise did her the honour of moving into the quiet hall with her ; the night porter hastened from his place to usher the visitor into the taxicab. Frances Falaise faded back with a kind handwave. Looking hungrily from the cab window, Diana saw that she had receded into the lift. It was moving . . . one could still see the gleam of her dress. And that was over.

That was over.

Chapter 7

THE sons sold the land and the home where they had grown up. It sold for £60,000 while they were still honeymooning.

"I always knew they would do it," Rivers said, wisely nodding.

"It was Bertie whom your husband mean' to farm it and live there," Rivers added quietly, as they sat together by a wood fire after their light supper; "he knew in his heart that the others did not want to take on after him. Now it's gone! Charles and Robert thought you might make a fuss, so they put it all through quietly. Not even Morris quite knew their ideas. After all, you gave it to them to do what they wished with. Bertie's and Irene's shares will be portioned out fairly and kept for them—you will see. Everything will be fair."

"Yes. I know everything will be fair. The weddings were lovely, didn't you think?"

"Lovely. I was glad I could go up for them," Miss Rivers said.

"Would you think me silly if I told you that I am thinking of going over to the United States?"

"It might do you a lot of good. For you are missing your husband. You are missing his adoration. You must remember, my dear, that I knew you both; and how happy you were in each other."

"Are you happy, dear Rivers?"

"Very happy. I cannot expect the great things you still expect—the grandchildren who will come and stay here with you. . . . You will see."

"Robert and Charles will be good fathers—oh, I am sure of it. They will want their children with them. . . ."

"Every man who is in love with his wife wants her off

with him alone. My experience—ah, well. I've mentioned that to you before. We are just beating the air by this talking."

"Yes," said Diana. "And I am quite free. No one wants me. . . ."

At least Charlie had wanted her.

"Nonsense," Rivers said. "You have your daughters and your grandchildren. Only you fret for Irene because she was your last, and for Bertie because he was your first."

"Yes."

It was an extraordinary experience.

And yet how ordinary for a modern woman to arrange her passport, her sailing ; the dates for everything. She was not going to stay now that the old house was sold, and the purchase price properly divided. Of course all concerned were anxious for her to pick out all she wanted from the furniture, the pictures, the silver ; solid Georgian silver, a lot of it. But she took very little more than she had moved already to the other house. She went up to Town and stayed with Marion when she arranged—for the first time in her life—her travelling affairs ; passport and steamer accommodation ; dates ; all of it to precede Frances Falaise's return to the United States. She thought : "I will cast off my mourning for Charlie when I get to the other side. I shall buy New York clothes."

She had a few introductions to sedate people on the other side. Club acquaintances had pressed them upon her. Meeting Follett again before she sailed, he had said his friends would call upon her at . . . Where did she plan to stay when in New York ?

"The Plaza or the Ritz-Carlton would amuse and please you, I think ; or if you want a flat otherwise than in a hotel, I will send a line to my lawyer to get in touch with you ; may he meet you on landing unless you expect friends ?"

"If you would give me his name, I should be delighted," she said. And she was glad to the heart that she could also say—thanks to her club acquaintances—that she expected to be met; and . . . "you know what friends are . . . ?"

"Of course, of course," he said, as if he believed it; could not imagine otherwise. But his look at her—this man who understood women—was quiet and sympathetic.

Her daughters were on the ship; her sons and one of the brides too. The other bride—that would be Charles's wife—was not there. He delivered a message from her. And of course there were flowers—a plenteous display. But she missed Charlie! Oh, how she missed him! Never had she travelled alone for a long journey. Not a soul was about her who wanted her tenderly; who would watch her; care for her above all else.

She wondered why Charles's wife had not come; but, these days, she was careful over asking any question which might savour of criticism.

It was joy when suddenly Charles smiled; drew her aside; said in a low jubilant voice: "We're going to have an addition to the family. She is not feeling herself this morning."

A quick radiance and sympathy warmed her through. She smiled; said his wife must take care of herself. She sent her dear love. . . . How meaningless phrases were! Robert smiled too as if he understood, and said they weren't in any hurry. Clare and Marion looked so nice; so charming, going to look at her cabin; saying cheerful things. "Beautifully airy" . . . "Plenty of room." Nothing really meant anything much, for Charlie was not here.

Charles disappeared. "I was asking about your seat at table," he said when he came back. "You're at the captain's table. I've seen the chief steward. Now you'll be all right."

Robert said: "We could all have a bottle here in the cabin. In fact I've brought a couple. Three-mile limit, you know. . . . Your cabin steward has 'em."

It was helpful to be doing something gay. The steward hovered about, smiling. He had glasses, and he popped the first champagne cork. They all raised glasses; each one toasting her.

And she?

She toasted Charles's wife, who might send her a little grandchild to stay by and by. And she thought that the child had been conceived at the old house that week-end shortly before the wedding. The young people had not been quite clever enough. Not so clever as they thought themselves to be. . . . She and Charlie had not often been clever either. . . .

Marion was remarking that her children would both go back to school today.

"I shall see them off this afternoon. They sent their love to Grannie. They asked for postcards from America showing some very high buildings."

"Of course they shall have postcards! I shall write to you all."

And as she smiled over it she remembered how infrequent her postcards had been to her own children on holiday—when she was away with Charlie. It had to be an almost surreptitious writing and posting. Hall porters had seemed to aid and abet her—as if they guessed the smiling lady was anxious.

Little incidents came back to her in flashes while everyone was saying pleasant things. It was not that she wanted to feel any nostalgia for the past. The future lay before her; and she told herself that only she herself could make it. But could she remake things which seemed shattered—so that they happened to her all over again—only, now, bright and glorious? She looked happy and expectant and appeared to take an interest in everyone's news. She talked of a wonderful supper she had had with Frances Falaise in her flat—"just the two of us". And as she said it, there was Morris, standing close to her, and his hand was down by his side,

and her hand dropped to her side ; so that they clung for a brief unnoticed moment.

Unnoticed ?

All of her family gathered here knew of that clasp of hands, and breathed a sigh of relief inwardly ; unconsciously.

She read easily—and sadly—in their eyes that, when the ship drew out of harbour, everyone here, seeing her off, would go away relieved ; conscious of a slightly pathetic duty done.

She had had her hair dressed ; she wore a new hat ; her stockings were of the finest ; her shoes perfection. She felt as one on ceremonial parade, and that is how she looked. Her eyes gaily challenged any eyes.

“ Brave thing,” Paters thought ; and he made a note that he would comment to his wife about it—so that she would write often ; and let the children write too ; once a month, say, wouldn’t hurt them. He raised his glass to her again.

Sir Bernard came in, smiling, with a gaily wrapped bottle of champagne of his own. “ Had to see you off, dear,” he said so kindly, kissing Diana’s cheek. “ That bottle looks empty. I’ll open this.” Well, there were eight of them now ; Bernard refilled the glasses. “ In good spirits ? ” he asked her. “ Needn’t answer. I can see you are.” What he saw was that she was near to tears—the champagne on top of emotion ? “ Don’t stay away from us too long,” he said. It was one of those things people uttered when whatever they said hardly mattered.

“ No. I shan’t stay too long. . . .”

“ How long is that ? ”

“ Oh, just . . . just . . . some months, I daresay. . . .”

It was Bernard also who, while talk and laughter rose, got her into a corner ; and asked her kindly if she was really happy about going away like this alone. He was too terribly shrewd, she thought, and she put on what poor armour she had before his questions, his kindness and his clever eyes.

"I have to live alone now," she said. "And I must get used to making the best of it."

"If you're back, you must come with us for part of the school holidays."

"Or perhaps you'd lend them to me for a little while," she ventured.

"The holidays are the only time I really get hold of them," he said. "I want them with us—and so does Marion."

She felt a deep warm appreciation of Bernard. She had been very cold, standing there among them all—cold to the marrow. She had not belonged. Not their faults! Their presence there was duty—and perhaps some compassion?

But Bernard understood?

How much did they love her? Or was love a precious thing which must pass when one had lost one's mate? Lost also a warmth, a sun, a life elixir which, for the rest of one's days, one must live without? She was full of perplexity which she must not pass on to Marion or Bernard or Clare or Paters. Or to her sons, now with their own wives—her sons, discarding the old home because it had never seemed a happy home to them.

"I must avoid sentimentality; they are all practical; what goes down deep in them they will not show me; I have never had their confidence." She thought this now, as they all drank the last glass of champagne, toasting her and her travels.

"Rivers will have everything finished for you when you come back," Clare was saying, with a good imitation of interest in her mother's house; her doings. Marion and Clare moved close to her, and the men gathered together near the cabin door; glasses in hand, talking.

But Morris also came to her . . . the anxious lover.

And smiling, she raised her glass to him; and he clinked his with hers.

She didn't know that the family thought: "Well, it may take time; but heaven send that she marries him."

She didn't know that they were already allotting her the safe place ; a life where she wouldn't pine nor hanker after her grandchildren. Although, of course, some child would be lent now and then—say in the Christmas holidays, to be taken to the pantomime by Grandma.

"All visitors off the ship, please. All visitors . . ." the stentorian voice trailing away, going on along the gangway. . . .

She experienced a pang of fear that must come from loneliness, because no first-class passenger, with all details for her comfort arranged, need feel fear. And she went up on deck with her party to see them away. There they stood below on the quay, waving to her, patiently waiting, till, evidently, Bernard had to go. Her daughters waited a little longer—she saw them now through tears, and so she signalled her final farewell, and emphasised it by turning away to go below again.

But Morris stayed till the last minute, though she had gone ; and she guessed that, while she closed the cabin door upon herself ; and let herself cry. Unwanted widow ! Unwanted mother ! . . . She gave herself to an orgy of crying till mere pride and shame pulled her together. "I have been spoilt," she said aloud. "Spoilt. . . . Now it is for me to start again." Oh, but she couldn't. She couldn't. She couldn't ever again feel that thrill of the blood ; that sense of being satisfied beyond all longing. When, in Charlie's arms, with the high exultant moon glancing in on them between the flung-back curtain of a certain high room in Naples, looking over the bay, she could even forget the children.

It was only now. . . .

The flowers in her cabin showed her she was not unwanted, did they not ? The daughters-in-law had remembered the right gesture and chosen them. . . . Yes. All was as it should be. The flowers were lavish and beautiful. Dry the tears ! Fool that she was !

So she began her long voyage.

Why was she so eager to start now? Why not wait till the papers gave the theatrical news that Miss Falaise was leaving the cast of her play, to open with the play in New York? Why this hurry? *Well*, she thought to herself, *it is because I want to seem settled; to appear at home there . . . when she arrives.*

I cannot wait to see that woman Mrs. Falaise.

Mrs. Falaise would be entirely at home in the great country; also probably in other countries. She would be an accomplished and poised hostess; she probably knew her wide world; for Americans were great travellers.

She would be lovely to look at; and . . . what was truly her relationship to Bertie that he had taken her name? Irene too? They had taken this woman's name. . . . As she thought of it she felt quite certain of her own loss. And she knew that any appeal to this stranger could only seem foolish; she might meet a front of flat incredulity; pity even, for her middle-aged fuss; her incomprehensible errand. In fact, this visit to the States must not for a moment seem to be an errand; it must seem only a pleasure; a desire to see the fabulous country; a necessity to forget her grief for her recent loss by having a pleasant change of scene. What stranger wanted to meet a mourner?

She lingered over beginning her unpacking.

She wondered now over Charles's wife—that gay little girl who had come so happily to his old home, and, with Robert's gay girl, made up the week-end party. How charming the girls had been! How adequate to all occasions! Why had she not come to the ship even if . . .

She herself had accepted Charles's reason, smiling, just as she must accept all—naturally. They and their private lives had passed from her, and she knew it. Charles had not been quite himself—but then, what was himself now? She did not know. It was right, no doubt, but none the less hard, for her to renounce them—and with the word “renounce”

in her head she had to swallow the whole truth—that for years past she had never had them. Their childish troubles—all children had troubles—had been confided to Rivers' ear, and she had explained; advised; comforted.

One had always been able to say to oneself: "It will be all right. There's Rivers."

She took off her neat hat; and sat down; feeling old. Fresh young voices were passing along the gangway which ran past her cabin; and she felt a squeeze of the heart like a pain, wanting to see them; talk with them; note their attitude to life. She wanted to learn. She felt suddenly and weakly the futility of her errand—if errand it could be called. But she wasn't going to be beaten by hesitations. What she had come to do she would do. It was her life-line that was breaking if she could not, somehow, succeed.

She unpacked slowly and asked for tea in her cabin. The stewardess had noted this fairly affluent passenger who was gracious too. It wasn't always the monied people who tipped well as a social duty. No, it was the quiet ladies like this one, with a kind smile for all; the well-set-up worldly passengers—worldly through training and inheritance—those were what the stewardess and the stewards liked to see. So Mrs. Wycombe was welcomed; she was assiduously waited upon. And certain passengers of her own calibre sought her out; and she was seated at the captain's table as Charles had arranged. Nevertheless it seemed a strange voyage—this first one taken alone; when she did not know quite why she was going; nor whom she would look for first. Sometimes it seemed, as she thought of it, quite easy to find and make the acquaintance of this unknown Mrs. Falaise; and sometimes it was impossible; a fool's errand; embarrassing and futile.

"Where are you staying?" she was sometimes asked by this or that passenger; and she said she thought at the Plaza. . . . Advice was given, recommendations were made to her, but she clung to what had been said.

"It looks over a park—Central Park," she said. "I like that."

She received invitations for week-ends out of town. She could not accept them until—until——

Until she had found Mrs. Falaise.

.

Another woman passenger was going to the Ritz-Carlton ; but she had friends to meet her ; friends who carried lavish welcoming bouquets. This passenger vanished into a big luxury car and drove off, just remembering to wave to the nice lonely traveller with whom she had made acquaintance ; and on whom she had promised to call. Mrs. Wycombe knew, of course, that this was one of those kind intentions tossed to the winds at the last moment of waving farewell.

But it seemed to tell her that she still belonged in the world ; she was still a warm live woman, and recognised as such.

In the great strange hotel she was carried in a lift to her room—and it looked out over green spaces, trees, across the busy street far below. And now she was truly all alone ; no Morris ; no daughters ; no kind sons-in-law ; left to do her own 'anxious work. So, to begin at once, lifting her telephone receiver, she asked an alert voice if it could get her the telephone number and address of a Mrs. Falaise who lived in Connecticut. Could it somehow be traced ? The voice made no doubt that fairly soon it could be traced ; and did she want to call ? "No . . . yes, please," said Mrs. Wycombe.

And she sent for tea ; and they brought her "English tea", very lavish.

She knew that on the ship she had been too quiet, too distraught, for those kind promises to call on her to be anything but vague expressions of goodwill. She was middle-aged ; alone and lost. Would she be a sparkling dinner

guest? A lovely apparition entering a room of people? No. She must count herself out. . . . She began to unpack her few clothes—she hadn't brought much—for Rivers, in her shrewd way, had said: "Buy out there. I've heard the best New York shops are lovely. Give you something worthwhile to do!"

Then the telephone operator's voice came again saying, as a matter of course: "Room 60? Mrs. Wycombe? . . . I got your lady on the 'phone here waiting for you. . . ."

She was speaking to an unseen woman many, many miles away. A woman in a storied state called Connecticut. The operator had made up her mind for her with her "Yes . . . no . . . yes. . . ."

It was a vital voice which came to her, enquiring who she was, and what could Mrs. Falaise do? Diana tried not to hesitate: not to stammer: and it was difficult. She pulled herself together. "How kind of you to answer yourself! I fear I am just a stranger from England—I landed today. . . . My name is Diana Wycombe. . . ." Would that register? Would a quick reaction come? No. Had Frances Falaise written . . . ? Perhaps there was just rather too long a silence to happen naturally; but then the unknown voice said encouragingly: "Yes?" And that was all.

"I ventured to ring you," said Diana steadily, "because I saw Frances Falaise in her new play in London, and I thought I would like to tell you how beautiful her performance is; although of course you have heard."

The voice, laughing: "Oh, but yes indeed! They cabled me that night. Then the New York papers had it in the morning; and then the evening papers carried the London criticisms. Oh yes. She got a hatid! It didn't take me long to hear. She is my darling adopted daughter, did you know?"

"I . . . I didn't exactly know; only about you. . . ."

"And have you met her, Mrs. Wycombe?"

"Oh yes. . . . And I had such a charming talk and supper with her alone."

"My! You were honoured! If I may say so!"

"I thought so too."

"Where are you staying in New York, Mrs. Wycombe?"

"At the Plaza."

"Oh, you'll like that. You must come and see me down here in Connecticut. . . . A week-end maybe? To tell me all about my beautiful girl."

"Thank you. I would very much like to meet you, because——"*Leave it!* she said to herself. "Just go and see. . . ." And she thought: "How easy and hospitable they are: She takes the risk of asking me."

The delightful voice asked: "Next week-end?" And so she committed herself to that date. "How kind of you," she said breathlessly. "Thank you. I will come gladly for a few hours, if I may."

The voice said: "Oh no. Please! For the week-end."

"Just—just for Saturday night, then . . . thank you so much."

And now she was strung up; in a daze of apprehension; of anticipation. She turned to tea. There were sandwiches and rich tiny pastries—"English tea". She thought of the clothes she had brought. How choose those to wear before this unknown woman who sounded so secure, so happy? So natural; so gay?

Would Bertie be there? Certainly Irene could not—and she must stop thinking of Irene by that name. She was Frances—perhaps after her "mother"? She was glad for tactical reasons—if any tactics would avail her—that she would have visited this household before the actress sailed back, to take up her part in New York. Perhaps she would have ingratiated herself before that time? How meekly she thought! Yet how hopefully! And somehow the night went by in a deep sleep. She didn't send for dinner nor go down to the big restaurant. She couldn't have eaten any

more—the talk with Mrs. Falaise filled her mind to the exclusion of anything else. The talk at once exhilarated and dismayed her ; and—when, soon, she went to bed—it lulled her to sleep. Such bright tomorrows !

Such bright tomorrows !

As the hired car—she had chosen to drive, to see the country more intimately—neared the coast village of Woodington where Mrs. Falaise lived, she absorbed, more and more avidly, the lie of the land through which she passed. Beautiful and sedate country houses in big grounds guarded by great gates ; small villages ; a country club, the clubhouse of which looked important. Young people passed through the gates on horseback, cantering ; young gods and goddesses they appeared to her—so tall, slim, straight, gay ; no care in the world ; rich children. . . .

Their very carriage, their laughter on the air, called : “ Freedom ! ”

Then her car passed into Woodington itself, once a fishing village no doubt, but appearing now to be the playground of the wealthy who had built their summer houses here—some large, some like Swiss chalets on the grander scale. Flowering gardens abounded. She caught the sight of the sails of yachts out at sea or at anchor in the harbour. White-winged smaller boats stood also out to sea, with the fishermen in them. And Mrs. Wycombe thought to herself helplessly for a moment : “ She would never leave all that she has found here—and come back to me. . . . ”

Besides, she did not even pretend to herself to misunderstand the relationship between Frances Falaise and Follett.

It was Saturday. She thought vaguely of churchgoing tomorrow when she passed an upstanding church, beautifully planned and architected. This would be a rich community—rich and humble mixed ; for, looking from the

window, she saw briefly as they ran on, a fishing beach that looked as if it had been useful for centuries ; with fishermen bending over their boats ; or sailing in or out ; or anchored in the wide shallow bay.

The car turned through the village and there were small old houses cheek by jowl with the more ornate places of week-enders. It was peaceful, and, after all, not so different from places she would find at home. Some working men touched their hats to her, for it was evident she was going to Mrs. Falaise's. Then she was going through very wide gates and drawing up before the house ; seeing, as if she were at home, the reddening leaves of an expansive spring creeper from which the flowers had already faded.

On the long porch, which ran round two sides of the house, sat a woman in a rocking-chair, with two spaniels at her feet. "

A woman with gold-grey hair—much like her own—beautifully cared for ; of medium height ; with a figure also well cared for ; hands exquisitely manicured ; grey linen dress belted round a still slender waist with a wide gold-and-silver belt ; a string of fine pearls round her neck. . . . All the feminine touches which said very plainly to another woman that she knew how to be a woman ; she knew what it was to be beautiful. This spoke specially to Mrs. Wycombe, to point out to her that this woman was more versed than herself in feminine lore.

Mrs. Falaise rose lithely to her feet and stood, welcoming.

They took each other's hands, looked into each other's eyes. Their voices spoke together.

"How kind of you to come all this long way for a stranger ! "

"How very nice of you to ask me down."

"May I tell your chauffeur to go round to the back—he will find someone. . . . He can stay, can't he ? You won't go till Monday ? "

Decision ! How dared she decide ?

"I thought—thank you so much—that he had better go home. I mean back to New York. I'll just speak to him." By the time she had turned to the hired chauffeur again, telling him to come back for her on Monday, she had fumbled for and found his tip ; and he was in his seat again. "Good day, madam ; and thank you." And she wanted to go back with him ; she wished, in an access of timidity, that she hadn't accepted the invitation at all.

But mercifully it was too late: He and the car was moving away, and a manservant had brought a tray of drinks.

"Would you like to see your room before you have a drink ?"

"Thank you ; perhaps——"

"Come along."

The graceful woman, so certain of herself and all she did, walked with her into the big low hall ; up a polished staircase of pine. And then she opened the door of a guest suite, and, smiling, closed the door again upon her guest. Mrs. Wycombe was relieved to find herself briefly alone. And she knew that the slender woman who had gone downstairs was aware—pityingly perhaps—that she wanted the few minutes to compose herself ; to assimilate what she had seen so far. A balcony ran round the angle of the house which sheltered herself, and she went carefully out. Below, the garden—bigger than she had surmised when she drove up—stretched away and away. There were a square mile of gardens, to comprise the flowers, the trees, two hard tennis-courts, a glimmering swimming-pool with a wide pavement round it, chairs, gay umbrellas set up over little tables ; flowering creepers growing over arbours. . . .

All the amenities a rich woman might want in and about her summer house. Diana sat before the triple mirror which backed her low, wide dressing-table. And the table had everything on it. Choice of creams, powders, lipsticks, rouges—and the powder bowls were old Bohemian glass ;

little flower bowls perhaps ; lending themselves to the toilet.

It was not herself that she saw first in the triple mirror—but the young Irene. How had the young Irene emerged from the shattering terror of the past into this haven of beauty where all was smooth, safe, kind ?

She combed her hair. She had always kept it lovely for Charlie ; but the time since his death had aged her. The discoveries since his death, with the grief and the loneliness ; and the knowledge that she had lost her children too—all this wrote the truth in her eyes, and on her mouth.

And her spirit ?

That was curiously daunted ; that failed her. She went out to seek the lost ones ; but the others had found them first. Others had led them into fairer ways, finding and fighting for their lives in a cockpit in which the girl, at least, had no direction ; no way signs ; no company. Diana knew that all her life she would hear the admired voice of Frances Falaise quietly and leisurely telling a cruel story. . . .

A story marked with blood and tears, humiliations ; danger ; despair.

“ I must go down,” Diana said aloud to herself. So she rinsed her hands in the bathroom which led from the room ; and went down. There were now people laughing and talking on the wide verandah. Young people had stopped in their ride, dismounted here before returning the horses to the country club whose grounds stretched for four miles in near distance ; tall girls from rich families ; slender with youth ; joyous with youth ; with young men who matched them. The royalty of youth that was happy covered them all.

They were deferential, charming to the Englishwoman who was visiting their country. They asked a lot of questions—but not too many. They mixed her a special cocktail ; they loved their hostess, and smiled on her divinely. They chattered of familiar things, and Mrs. Falaise could pick up

all the threads. This was a rich and gay young society, very sure of itself. Their horses were held under a group of trees in the shade by a groom. Presently a servant came out of the house with a stirrup cup for this groom. Life was abundant and light and gay. . . . And yet one could not be one with these beautiful people ; with these sure people—unconsciously resolute in the knowledge of their own accustomed good fortune.

She enjoyed an iced cocktail at once delicate and fiery. She looked at Mrs. Falaise. And then, as she looked, Bertie walked in.

Bertie !

He had returned by air ; he had come down from New York, changed into riding clothes, wanted someone to come for a gallop with him. But first he kissed Mrs. Falaise ; then he said " Hello " carelessly to the younger ones ; then was introduced to the Englishwoman. " But we've met—and talked—before ? " he said. " First at supper . . . or somehow . . . at Frances's first night in London ? And then . . . "

" Why, yes. We did just briefly. . . . " There ! She would not accent any chance meetings more than that ! She was going to be aloof ; calm ; gay ; uncaring as himself. " Nice to find you again," he said charmingly. Then a tall girl said : " Race you round to the beach and back." They went off towards the horses. She saw them mount—up—easily, springily ; and the next moment they were at breakneck gallop, disappearing over a slight rise in the ground, towards the sea. The trees on the rise hid them.

" So glad you remembered meeting Bertie," said Mrs. Falaise. " I'm very proud of my successful son. Besides, he's charming too—isn't he ? It's not only a mother's vanity ! "

" Charming," said Diana, losing her breath.

" I suppose he'll marry soon," said Mrs. Falaise, sighing.

But it was a mock sigh ; she wanted Bertie to marry ; she wanted grandchildren.

But they'd be mine ; not hers .

Diana didn't utter the thought aloud. She watched the other young people. Gay ; yet serious underneath ; adult. That was the word for them. Trust—that quality which above all is necessary to the young—was unimpaired. The world was their friend. She lost herself, looking after the vanished riders ; wondering from which point they would return. Mrs. Falaise watched her. But when, attracted to each other by their mutual regard, each turned and caught the other's eyes, the hostess only remarked easily : “ You have a family too ? ”

Pleasantly : “ My two daughters are married and have children ; my sons had a double wedding just before I came away.”

“ Oh, lovely ! —a double wedding ! *And* you have grandchildren ! ”

“ My daughters have two each. The regulation number today ! ”

“ You happy woman ! ”

Very quietly Diana answered : “ You are lucky too.” And she raised her eyes to look full into the eyes of Mrs. Falaise, which smiled and flashed ; meeting the challenge.

“ I am lucky too. But my family, as all my friends know, is adopted.”

“ Someone else's children. . . . ”

“ Yes. Someone else's children.”

“ One day they might be claimed ? ”

“ They would make their choice.”

“ You know what it would be, of course ? ” said Diana slowly.

They did not take their eyes from each other.

“ I know what it would be,” said Mrs. Falaise gently.

“ You are very confident.”

"Very confident, as you say."

The rest of the young people had settled down under the cedar trees, drinking a third cocktail. The servants were busy, here and there. "What is the girl's name? I didn't catch it," Diana asked. And Mrs. Falaise replied without hesitation, knowing what prompted the question: "Angel—Angelica really—van Huizen. Her people are very rich and very nice too. I feel glad they approve Bertie. Because I know they do. And well they may! He is so steady; he is a rock. It isn't often you can say that of a genius, is it? Oh, it is good to have a son like him!"

"What . . . what does he do?"

"Bertie? He is a partner in one of our biggest and best engineering firms. And though I say it of my adopted son, he is an important man. . . ." She mused, smiling. "He was a very clever—though unqualified—engineer when he got out here. He went straight to the best firm as soon as he could. . . . We encourage enterprise here, Mrs. Wycombe. They have launched several now famous inventions of his. . . . He must tell you himself in technical terms."

"I expect you know all the technical terms by heart," said Diana.

"Well, but it is so much more interesting to have the genius himself to tell you about it. . . ."

"I don't think your son will tell me."

"He's very modest," said Mrs. Falaise quickly. "Of course he might have one of his shy fits. . . ."

A little laughter.

"Shy fits". . . . There came through Diana's head that last time Bertie had quarrelled with his father. That swift bitter quarrel that rang through the closed door of the gun-room. And a young man with a bruise on his face leaping upstairs. And coming down again, bag in hand; and Charlie had met him. It was entirely a male battle.

She had stood hidden; had heard; had flinched; and her firstborn left home forever. After that, when Charlie

had taken her away, they came back to find Irene gone. Then Charlie was hurt; and her seemed to leave him—she knew that he tried all ways to find her and bring her back.

They had Charles and Robert; Marion and Clare. Why did she mourn in agony for the two who had left her? The firstborn; and the last. It was because of that incidence—the first and the last—the first great dawning after a day and a night of pain. And years later the perfect little girl, when she knew she would have no more.

There was lunch again on a wide verandah; good servants waiting on them.

The lovely tall girl who rode so well looked radiant; also uncaring; a darling of fortune. Mrs. Wycombe was to learn more of it during a brief after-lunch chatter with her hostess. “I *hope* they’ll marry; they’d settle down beautifully,” Mrs. Falaise said. “But then their lives are their own; they must live them. . . . Only I *hope*. . . .”

And they smiled at each other, Diana bleakly.

“*Must* you go on Monday?” the hostess said.

“Yes. Really. I must, thank you.”

The young ones were all away again; some home; a couple round the golf-course adjacent; the other couple—with whom Mrs. Wycombe’s mind coiled itself about and about—riding again. Bertie had changed his clothes. “They’re joining another riding party,” said Mrs. Falaise. “There are beautiful flat smooth sands just a couple of miles on, and they race. They made a book this morning. I’ve got fifty dollars on *her*!”

Diana laughed; that seemed right. “I wish I’d been early enough——”

• “Oh, I’ll show you the race programme if you like, and I’ll take your bets!” They laughed together.

Punctually the car returned. It was over—she would go. They looked at each other, gently ; with understanding. “ I should be thankful,” Diana thought. And aloud : “ When—when are they getting married ? ”

“ Oh, my dear, who knows ? Of course I should want a gorgeous wedding—but I don’t know what *they* want. They might slip away for a week—they all do such cunning things ! They might come back married—or not ! They are both so eager to make no mistakes that they might run their heads into some colossal blunder and never speak to each other again—for at least a day ! ”

“ Daughters. . . . ” Then Diana paused to think back. Marion and Clare had been quiet brides. Engagements had followed the allotted course. Everything conventional had been done. And both the sons-in-law had seemed perfect husbands. Each with her family of two ; each with her nice house with a garden—near enough to the heart of London for entertaining ; yet far enough out to have garden space for children’s playgrounds in their early years. . . .

“ My daughters married so happily and well,” she said, “ I don’t think they encountered all the storms of temperament as young people do now, I know. I’ve been a very lucky woman.”

She stepped into the car, waving goodbye to her hostess ; off on her way back to New York and the Plaza. Had she made any progress ? Was she any nearer to heart’s desire ? Wouldn’t it be better to go home to England, and be content with what she could glean in the plundered fields of her life’s harvest ?

All that was wise in her told her that it would be best. All in her that cried bitter tears hankered for these first-and last sheaves of the harvest ; hankered for the treasure that was lost.

For she knew deep in her heart that never more would she really claim Bertie or Irene—the first and the last. The first and the last—most precious of all.

She leaned back in the luxurious car and noted what she saw as she was driven fast along the good motoring roads, seeing again for stretches on either side the large wealthy houses, with high walls enclosing spreading grounds. The rich country—it had stretched out its hands to Irene and Bertie, after their hard suffering to survive.

But they had survived ; and her grandson too. When would she see him ? She must see him. She would plot ; contrive ; hint ; beg ; insist. She would tell them she must see the boy, son of Irene—the precious boy. All the pleasant Sunday she had not liked to put questions as to when and how and why she should see Mrs. Falaise’s “grandchild”.

She knew that was how Mrs. Falaise would speak of him : “My grandson.”

“Well, I have grandchildren,” she said to herself. The inner voice said : “But not Irene’s. Not Bertie’s. . . .”

So she was back in the Plaza, up in her suite ; agonisingly alone. For that she had not bargained—the loneliness ; but now she felt that she was forever lonely if she could not compromise for Irene’s son.

Why, she asked herself, why was Mrs. Falaise reticent about this little boy ? Because she meant to keep him—this childless woman ? Because she wanted her own—precious and inseparable ? So well did Diana know and share that feeling that an antagonism for that fortunate woman rose in her and burned.

“At least I could have *him* ! For a short while ; for a talk. At least I could be promised a sight of *him*. . . .” Only they would not listen to her on any grounds she could muster. They had their own right of way in this matter ; she had none.

It was evening and the park looked green and quiet from her windows. She must walk there tomorrow—see the zoo people had told her about ; look at the children playing.

The clerks at the desk had smiled at her ; the liftman had asked her if she had had a nice time in the country ; the room clerk at the end of the corridor had come to fit her key in the lock for her, saying it had surely been a lovely day. She told him where she had been and added : " To my friend Mrs. Falaise. . . . " And he said it sure was nice that she knew that lady. ' A great lady, he said. She opened the front door of her flat with the lie souring her mouth—but, after all, hadn't Mrs. Falaise been hospitable and friendly ; wouldn't she become a friend if one could not so count her yet yet ? And she tried to set herself to the tempo of this new land ; she liked the new land because Frances Falaise's son was here.

When she went into her suite it was cool and shady ; they had drawn down the shades for her—the unknowing Englishwoman. And on the side table, against the wall near the door, were two bouquets wrapped in cellophane. She tore off the wrappings : " *From your Rivers.*" And : " *From Marion and Bernard with love. Take care of yourself.*"

And she thought : " I'm glad they came just now. Not here for me when I arrived. *But just now.* How beautiful ! How beautiful ! "

She was to see how New York made a habit of perfection over affairs like this.

Morris hadn't thought of it yet ; but he would . . . he would. She was hungry for all the signs of love from those she had left behind her. More than ever when she said goodbye to Mrs. Falaise had she longed for love ; and for belonging.

In the morning she would have a happy half-hour thanking Marion and Bernard and Rivers. What was Rivers' first name ? It was Mary ; so whenever she wrote to her now, Mary it should be. It was still strange and anxious to know that now she must look for love ; look for it and treasure it from wherever it came.

She began to want Morris's flowers above the others. In

her cabin they had been lovely. And there was a flurry in her mind and she was lonely for him. She would write him also a very long letter to make sure of a reply. "For," she thought, "now I must always give so that I may receive."

Charlie had to the end thought her very beautiful. Of course she had known for some years that if she were beautiful it was not the same; not the girl's beauty which had enthralled him as a young man. But his idea of her as one of the loveliest women on earth had never faltered. He had gone to his grave with her image printed on his mind. But now . . . She must see very clearly; think of herself very truthfully; just as she was. And, waking in this mind, she went to walk in the park, and saw the children with their nurses just as at home; with hoops, and balls. On ponies; sometimes alongside a riding master or a parent. She walked to the small zoo also.

She walked into the streets; and saw shops, with talented window dressings; that had been left for the Sunday strollers yesterday. She went into a church on Fifth Avenue—a Roman Catholic church; and there she kneeled and prayed. It appeared to her that in this church one need not follow any form of service, so mostly she kneeled and tried to pray. There was some special service today. She stayed behind the rest of the congregation when it was over, to walk round and see the church; the richly beautiful church; and soon, as noiselessly she walked and loitered and stopped, she found a silent-footed priest beside her. They spoke to each other—voices need not be hushed. She let her thoughts flow into words which the priest received; and the burden of life lifted a little from her shoulders. And when she turned suddenly to go he did not move with her; but remained, and she felt his eyes all the time resting on her; his eyes were with her till she left the church. Charlie would not have liked this. He was not a man of formal religion. He appeared with her at church on special days—Christmas,

Whitsun, Easter, Harvest Thanksgiving—that was the farmer in him—but he was not otherwise devout. Rivers used to take the children.

But despite her perplexities, her hurts, she would not, Diana said to herself, have told the priest any iota of it. He knew, his eyes had said. His eyes had pierced her; how Charlie had hated “this popery”! With the living at home in his gift, he always wanted a very moderate man, and took more trouble to find one who wanted such a living than he took over anything else except his wife. Now, here in New York, she knew that she had been read deeply; that the priest believed she would come to him, perhaps next day; if not, then some other day; it was always the right time; and any moment was ripe and fit for proselytism. She knew that he knew that she was deeply bereft; in tragic sorrow; and she knew that—if she asked—he would promise healing. But she said to herself: “I might choose his medicine. Or I might not. For there is a choice! There is a choice!”

So she was out again into Fifth Avenue, walking towards her hotel and feeling that the high flat, looking over the park, was home. But perhaps—certainly—she would go again to the church she had just left.

She must be open, heart and mind, for her new life.

She lunched in the restaurant. She chose a wine—a French white wine; and she had seldom chosen a wine for herself. But Charlie had taught her to be knowledgeable, and she did not hesitate. She would have liked to order her meal to be served in her flat; but she must not do this. She must emerge into this huge and complicated new world; have an easy place in it. She had to think of Frances Falaise.

Chapter 8

THE brothers, Diana's sons, had settled on houses fairly near each other—after all—both in Hampton. Honeymoons over, they met again, the brides more or less busy over settling in. Each man had decided on the same staff. "Man and wife," said Charles succinctly. "Can't have half a dozen maids these days. The house could accommodate a married couple nicely." June's mother had found for them two good maids—all on her own initiative; and she hadn't liked Charles's prompt curt veto.

"Oh, but they've been with such a nice lady who is going to travel for two years. June knows them. It would be so nice for June. . . . You don't know, Charles, how much it helps a bride to be well fixed for service. June likes them too, Charles. . . ." she said fatly.

He took her by the fat elbows. "Now, Mother-in-law, let it alone. I want a man and wife—far better for June. Man can look after my clothes."

"But, Charles. . ." His mother-in-law, a widow, was arch. He was not going to stand arch mothers-in-law in his house. The house was his—though, of course, a man handed his wife the reins; had to; it was expected and all that. A man was supposed to stand by and see his wife's incapacities and just laugh. Well, he saw nothing to laugh at there. He shook the fat elbows jokingly, but there wasn't a smile on his face that the mother-in-law could call a smile. "Man and wife; good for the children when they come."

"Oh, is June to have babies so soon?"

"Well, should you be so surprised?" He released the fat elbows, and she drew a long breath.

"Oh, Charles dear, you don't mean. . . ."

"I mean June thinks she is going to have a baby."

" Oh, to think she didn't tell me first ! "

" Why should you mind that ? "

" Oh, she might have told me first ! " Her senseless—for senseless it was—protest annoyed him more than seemed to her reasonable. But then men weren't reasonable. There was . . . something wrong already ?

She would be careful ; she could see he was the son of his father—most certainly the son of his father ; and reports of Charlie Wycombe were that he had resented his children ; and worshipped his wife. Well, so long as his son worshipped June that was all right—but—but the honeymoon had lasted only a fortnight. How could June be sure of a baby now ?

And looking at her son-in-law's unrecalable face, she faltered : " Well, I must run away ; I've people coming to cocktails tonight before the theatre. They want to be early because of dining early. . . . I've been tempted to stay too long in this lovely little house . . . and of course I'm most excited . . . I can hardly think . . . the first grandchild. . . . Oh, Charlie, let me kiss you ! I've never kissed you ! "

" Wrong day perhaps," he said with a smile she didn't like ; and he took her to the gate, and showed her out. He didn't put her on her bus ; nor escort her to the station ; he was very queer ; a queer man. She wouldn't have her little June unhappy. No. He must have a strong hint that she had never been able to face unkindness. Such a demonstrative child ! Such a loving child ! He must be told—soon . . . some day.

But not now. He was smiling so queerly at her over the gate. A queer-tempered man ? She hadn't thought it during his courtship of her daughter ; her only precious child. Then he had been all ardour. Nothing was too good for the little amusing, mischievous girl who had even made him accept her mother. She could twist Charles round her finger—and her mother had told her friends so.

But not now ?

Was he just a honeymoon man—and then, forever after, a husband? A husband who would grow censorious with the years? A husband wrapped up in his affairs outside? . . . Oh, it was too soon for this. She must have a heart-to-heart with June, little June, tomorrow. And now—so exigent, so difficult was life!—she must get home to the flat where she and June had lived before the wedding—she had never let June have a flat of her own, though the question was often raised with more and more impatience by her daughter. But she had needed June's money.

A baby?

Well, of course Charles had had his own flat. You couldn't legislate so easily for your daughter nowadays. But now they were married. Considering that a baby was already on the horizon, thank God for that.

June's mother—whose life, during her long widowhood, was lived more or less in keeping face as well as she knew how; keeping face for June—had a long and anxious intuition that her care of her child was not over yet.

Charles had watched her down the road to the station. His hands gripped the top of the gate. And he saw exactly what he expected to see. A tall fellow coming away from the station, brief-case in hand—a fellow he had met with June before. In a sudden lust of jealousy, a keen sense of competition, he had taken her away from him; swept her off her little feet, and made her love him. The fellow's name was Philip . . . he didn't remember any more, if he had ever heard it. It had been, "Oh, Charles, this is Philip. . . ." The usual way the young introduced each other now.

It had been a little party in someone's flat—a bachelor went to a lot of parties like that. He had gone because of June. He went everywhere he could see June, if he had the chance. And then he took his chances into his hands and made more; and she took him home—he had wanted it as soon as he had grown jealous—with a killing jealousy—of

Philip. Philip Mayce. He remembered the fellow's whole name now.

During their short engagement he saw no more of Philip. But had she seen more? . . . She had married himself any way.

But now here was the fellow walking down the road; making for some place where he lived, obviously. Philip Mayce. A writer; with some sort of permanent paid job on a newspaper. There were now occasionally articles headed *Philip Mayce says* : . . .

Mayce was bareheaded. He came nearer and nearer. Charles did not move from his gate. They were level. Mayce said : " Oh, good afternoon. It's . . . why, aren't you June's husband ? "

" I am. " They looked quietly at each other. Mayce said that he had a room at the hotel farther down. " Very comfortable. Always liked Hampton. I'll meet you at the Golf Club, I expect ? "

" Maybe. We belong. . . . "

A quiet pause ; but in it Charles knew that Mayce had only one reason to be here ; and the reason was another man's wife.

" Quite surprised to see you, " he said, and turned away ; going unhurriedly up the path into the largish comfortable house. His own ; and the woman in it. And the seed of child within her. . . . His own.

They sat at dinner. An autumn night. Warm. June looked well ; not so pale as she had begun to be in the early mornings. The manservant was most capable ; waited adeptly—Charles liked a servant to stay at table. He did not want to accede to the informalities which had become general over the country for the years since the war. This man was satisfied with his situation ; liked his master, who meant that he should be well liked. But he did not think so

much of the mistress. "Not the sort of mate for him," he had said to his wife, who concurred. "In a year or two she'll be just nothing," his wife had said. "Pretty as a picture now, but you'll see by and by. He takes a lot of standing up to."

The servant thought of what his wife had said, and tonight he judged her to have been right. Pretty little thing—Mrs. Wycombe—with all the modern dash; but apt to grow like her tiresome mother in time. "Two or three babies will take the guts out of her," his wife had added.

Tonight she was making up to her husband; one could help seeing that. For one thing, it was so palpably a failure. For another, Mr. Wycombe wasn't in the mood.

These last few days the servant had seen Mr. Wycombe thinking. Besides, a tall fellow with a name you saw in the newspapers sometimes had begun dropping in; always early in the day. Or sometimes she would take her shopping basket; disappear towards the local shops; then not be seen till she hurried in, late for her solitary lunch. The tiresome fat mother had started turning up too . . . she had something worrying in her head. She was always asking why young Mrs. Wycombe did this or that? Where she disappeared to these days; why she wasn't on the telephone when Mother rang up. "You oughtn't to play golf now . . ." Mother had said in the servants' hearing once or twice. "The early months count. . . . Darling," said the old fool, "I'd like to see you with a family."

These trivialities the servants knew and did not underrate. They had their own interpretations, and were seldom wrong. The man groomed Charles meticulously. The master found all to his hand. The mistress? A little thing—beginning to suffer nausea in the mornings—early days for that! They felt sympathy and did what they could in the way of waiting on her, and were glad when her sister-in-law came to see her; or when the two sisters-in-law went out to a *matinée* and—maybe—confidential gossip.

"She's not telling her own mother much," said the woman servant.

And so it happened that when Mayce dropped in now and then and stayed to lunch, they were not unobservant; they saw, heard; and remembered.

Hardy the manservant advised his wife to see nothing, hear nothing and know nothing; and she agreed. But they knew, all the same.

"What he's waiting for I don't know," said Hardy to his wife; when the calculated oblivion of Charles to what went on was not lost on either; when they knew he saw; and knew; and still said nothing.

Hardy said to his wife as he put a perfect polish on Charles's shoes in the scullery: "What he's planning I don't like to think."

"It frightens me," she answered, very low.

So the servants redoubled their kindnesses to the young wife; and as the pregnancy advanced they feared more. But Hardy said: "You'll see. He's got his case, and he knows it. And, worse luck, she seems to feel safe now. That's how he wants her to feel. And after all I got my orders, a month ago, to make up his bed in the small spare room. You'll see, old girl, he has everything ready; but he'll put up an humane excuse about not wanting to frighten or worry her while she's in this state of health. You'll see! Now she won't run up and down to Town, he'll stay up more; and we'll have Mr. Mayce in most of the time. She's very confident. And what's more, or worse, as you care to put it, the master pets her up; he does his duty by her; he gives her everything she wants. She's frightened to want anything now; but he guesses; all just as if he loves her."

"He does love her! That's what makes it worse!"

"*'Each man kills the thing he loves,'*" said Hardy; and felt literary.

“What a thing to say ! ”

“I didn’t say it ; it was written by some cleverer feller. Famous feller. Well, a wise man can’t take a knife nor poison his wife these days ; nor beat her ; but he knows something else to do. With everyone on his side. But if you ask, I couldn’t tell you what it is ; only, he’ll do it.”

By now the sister-in-law knew. June had confided in April utterly and wholly. But April, who was postponing her first child—her wish and Robert’s—was uneasy ; not shocked ; but uneasy lest she should, by receiving this confidence, inculcate herself in the family displeasure ; the family astonishment—for she, as well as the servants, knew that Charles was the last man to be trifled with. She had Robert, and had no delusion as to forgiveness had she done what June had done. The family might have had its own troubles, and battles, and unhappinesses ; but when it took in a stranger it must make her one of themselves. She must incorporate herself with them. The mer demanded it—silently, because it should not be necessary to use words.

The men were inflexible.

But now Charles had got himself a stupid woman ; and she would pay the full penalty. There would be none to stand up for her ; she must save herself.

April asked of June :

“Did he want a child so quickly—Charles, I mean ? ”

“I could only hope he would,” June faltered. “I put it down to . . . to . . . well, before we were married . . . you should know.”

“Will it tally ? ”

“N-n-not quite.”

“Besides, there are blood tests.”

“I’d forgotten,” the girl, sunk into the bed where she rested for the afternoon, whispered. “I’d forgotten that.”

• “You’re in a pretty good mess. What are you going to do ? ”

• “Hope he’ll believe me . . . it might have been his. . . .”

"But he can divorce you just the same—with proof."

"Yes. Yes. I know. I know *now*."

A short silence.

"You did just the same as I did," said June, suddenly. "That week at Robert's and Charles's home we were all the same."

"Only," said April clearly, "you now lie there, fretting about what to do; and I don't. I have been faithful to Robert; and I always shall be. You haven't been faithful to Charles."

"Charles isn't lovable. He can make it very difficult for a woman to love him."

"Well, now *you* have *made* it difficult for him to love *you*."

"What shall I do? What shall I do?"

"Girls always say that," said April gloomily. "You aren't the first, and you won't be the last."

"You have a different sort of home behind you. I have only Mother; and look at her! Listen to her!"

"She is very human. She will be kind to you."

"She's horribly poor."

"Yes. You may have thrown away a good thing."

"I've tried to get an abortion. It's too late. I'll . . . I'll look for another doctor in Town. Someone will know where I can go. . . ."

"You risk dying of it."

"Yes. I don't want to die."

"Squalid; it's squalid," April thought; and she shuddered inwardly. She was cold and felt faintly sick. What an *impasse*! For June had no way of escape—unless she had been more cautious and clever than her sister-in-law could believe of her. Then she said, hesitating, that she must go. And: "Let me know if I can help."

"No answer."

April had kept away a little, then—relations to be met in Town; some lectures she wanted to attend twice a week;

parents had birthdays, and for each she would go up for the whole of the day ; and Robert would come for the birthday dinner after his office. Mummy and Daddy were great people for family occasions, though they liked to keep them for the family.

"She's fading away," June thought ; and she smiled and agreed it was so nice to keep birthdays quietly as people got older. She went up sometimes too, to meet Mayce for lunch ; for a quiet afternoon at his Soho flat while he wrote his articles. But sometimes he stopped writing, and for an hour they "loved" each other. He was so much nicer to her than Charles was now. In his arms she ceased to fear. . . . She did not know that on each occasion she was followed and tailed ; she knew nothing of what Charles did about it ; and she never suspected the quiet insignificant man who dogged her—the detective from the best private agency ; the most successful agency ; which had brought all the men and women whom they spied on to the divorce court with almost unflinching regularity.

Sometimes, when she could not go up to Town, she met Mayce's train at the station, by a device. The device was to go to the station bookstall for some magazines to while away her time ; because it was so much nearer than the stationer's in the main street.

Charles used to say : "You don't seem to see much of April these days", and she would reply that April had devoted parents who no doubt wanted her often. . . . "They've had birthdays, darling. April told me so."

She would look at him as she sat on his right ; and think how often his hand used to cover hers, lift and kiss it as soon as the servant left the room ; how they would look into each other's eyes. Now all that honeymoon sentimentality was finished. She had had few girl friends, and these few had married or gone abroad. Or they weren't the sort she could know now. She began to feel herself alone in danger ; and Charles, once married, was a man who quickly

metamorphosed himself from passionate lover to expectant husband. Expectant of such a lot of qualities that she did not possess. She was happy only with Mayce.

And she pored with pride over his articles which became rapidly more and more commented upon; cleverer and cleverer, she said to herself; on him she could lean for all the little lovely ways of love that did not exist for Charles. Only she must be careful. . . . When Mayce knew about the baby, he had cautioned her: "Be very careful, love; you've got to think a long time before you exchange him for me. A great solid lump of muscle and bone like that! With money, my love. Think, and think hard."

She now thought hard? Mayce—even Mayce—thought hard too. It was under his tutelage that she tried to coax Charles; that she would wait smiling and welcoming when he came home; under Mayce's direction that she really took a live interest in Charles's day. But now he did not want her interest.

With narrowed eyes, looking at her, he would say:

"I don't bring my business home with me, my dear. At home I want the other side of life. . . . And while I think of it, I shan't be home tomorrow night at all; nor the night after. . . ."

He had soon had two sleuths on the job; and as he spoke he knew he had her cornered; there was little more to do before he took action.

One night:

"Have your mother to stay with you if you like. A girl is supposed to want her mother these times, isn't she?"

"Oh, darling, how deliciously old-fashioned!"

"I'm supposed to be a bit old-fashioned, no doubt. But do have your mother. You may have to give me three days' leave of absence. I've business on. Don't be lonely."

"I . . . I . . . shan't be lonely. I have the baby."

She made large eyes at him. "Such a companion! You wouldn't know, darling; nor did I. I thought a baby on its

slow way—oh, how slow ! Well, I thought it would seem like an encumbrance till it was born. But I'm learning a lot of things about babies . . . you wouldn't believe. . . .”

“ Wouldn't I ? ” He had not kissed her when he came in tonight. He might have been an old married man—except that old married men surely did kiss the automatic kiss, didn't they ? He was quiet, and withdrawn through dinner ; and after dinner he went out.

Went out ? Where ? . . . To the committee-meeting of the Golf Club—he had been elected a member of the Committee at taking up residence here. Well, it was all business with him, she had thought. She ran after him into the hall. . . . “ Why bother ? ” she said breathlessly. “ You get so little time at home. Can't the committee do what's necessary without you ? ” •

“ You take life lightly, my dear. Can't let obligations simply slide. You should know some of your women neighbours better.”

“ Oh, I shall by and by. It's early days yet.”

She moved to kiss him. He brushed by her and went away. She called after him down the garden path : “ What time will you be home ? ”

And he turned and answered : “ Couple of hours, I suppose. Amuse yourself.”

She went into the house. It was late autumn and dark ; no moon tonight. Both the Hardys had asked for an extra night off for a special picture now showing locally. She had granted it, of course. There were the dinner things to clear and wash up, and so on. Should she wash up ? She thought as clearly as she could these days. She would telephone Mayce. He was in the room he kept down here ; and writing a certain weekly article which was a regular commission. . . . She telephoned with a touch of hysteria : “ Charles is out at the Golf Committee meeting ; and the

servants asked for time to go to that flick—one daren't refuse them, of course. It was Mrs. Hardy's birthday, . . . Can't you . . ." As she began to ask it she began to feel that silly hysteria mounting—it was the baby. She knew that Mayce would respond to tears—as yet. When—if—Charles turned on them, would he respond then? She began to want to let him know it might be serious. . . . His voice was already answering her. "Well, if you're quite alone, darling, I'll run over. You shouldn't be alone; he shouldn't leave you." And hanging up, he thought that the child was his; no doubt of that; she had told him the intimate details of her married life; and though marriage would practically cover her lapses, he and she knew the truth. He and she knew that their affair had begun before she married the richer man. And he had been abroad afterwards briefly for his paper. . . . Hadn't known how long the assignment would last. . . . She had saddled Charles Wycombe with Philip Mayce's child.

That was her old mother crying and bullying—allied to her own fear. And Mayce was a long way off in the Balkans; and, anyway, he hadn't thought of marriage till he had had her frantic letter; then her quieter letter; then her engagement—very brief letter indeed; and her marriage.

But he would have married her, of course. Or, wouldn't he? Well, now that there was this other man, the old desire woke in him again; flamed up . . . there was a touch of romantic tragedy in all she had done. Brave child! His was the fault. And now, if Wycombe were thinking of divorce, and could prove his case, why . . . He forgot his relief when he had heard of the marriage; and felt himself culpable again. He was a highly sensitive man; and as he hurried along to the Wycombes' house, almost he felt, regarding her, the responsibility that was the responsibility of that fellow she had married.

She opened the door to him, and he saw that she had just been crying.

She was showing the burden she carried now. One would have seen she was pregnant. Tenderness for her rushed over him. On the other hand, the responsibility of taking her away from these surroundings—such as he couldn't yet provide—was considerable, even if she would come. And the divorce might be a pretty messy one. What sort of figure would he cut? He was rising in public esteem; stood well with the papers he worked for; was amassing a little money for the first time in his life. He was thirty-two. He dropped into the pleasant artistic sets here and there in London and Paris. Also on the Riviera. He had planned to go to New York to pick up the contacts there, which had just—only just—begun to beckon. Then . . . the letter—out of this promising sky, as it seemed. She had married . . . but was to bear his child. She would try to get the doctor to say it was premature. . . . Though she had had relations with her husband-to-be, so that she could also say . . . The complexity of his emotions worried him sick.

She had taken her way out—so it seemed. And the way might prove a happy one—who could say that it could not?

The answer was given here and now that it was not—and could not—be happy.

His arm about her, they went into the big lounge. She had drawn the curtains. He glanced warily about. Their shadows would fall on the pale curtains, by the light of the tall lamp in the background. "Stand back from the lamp," he stammered. "Oh, my dear, what is it?"

"I don't know," she wept.

Like many another man, he wished furiously that he had not got himself into this *impasse*. They had met quite often since he had come down here; before she had confirmed her pregnancy by that letter after her marriage—for she had married before she could trust even her thoughts to paper and post.

They sat on a couch away from the windows so that their shadow could no more be cast on the curtains. He kept his

arm about her, while—half whispering—she told him things and things and things—all seeming, to his clearer, male judgment, unimportant. But while he heard all she murmured, he revised that judgment. All she said in her broken voice was important. His mind went more swiftly than hers—but he was listening to what she said, all the same. He was soothing her till she stopped and just cried. Then at last, knowing that time was vital, he gave her a little shake to quieten her since kisses did not produce much effect—and told her that he would stand by her, that he loved her as much as ever; more than ever.

But it comes to a man that this is not worth while. A man thinks his own thoughts, even when telling the woman—that bundle of sensations and nerves—something kinder. She had been pregnant by him even before she went down to stay that week-end with Robert and April and Charles.

He remembered the mother of Charles and Robert had her own house.

He spoke of that week-end as soon as she was calmer. "Did you know that week-end before you went down to stay . . . before you were married?"

"Yes. I was afraid. I wondered. But the weddings were so soon; and I didn't know where you were."

"How is this going to end?" he said to himself—but aloud: "Does he suspect?"

"Yes. I am sure."

"Look here," he said. "For your sake, child—for your sake—we must think it over now; and quickly. How long before then—and when were you married? I've been trying to add up——"

"Three weeks . . . a—a month."

"Three weeks. Then . . . it may easily seem—if you had relations with him when you were down there——"

She told him in short words, tremblingly, that she suspected before then. That was why . . . why she had let

Charles sleep with her ; or no. It wasn't ; they had just lost their heads—at least she had.

" You didn't love me, then ? "

" Yes. I did. But you had gone. The Balkans—everywhere . . . I wrote to you—But then I dare not post the letters. How I went through the wedding-day I don't know . . . April came and made me up . . . "

" D'you suppose she knows ? "

" She guesses. Yes. . . She knows. "

" You've actually talked about it then ? "

She murmured that sometimes it was the safest thing to confess just to one person—the right person. April was a fine person. She would stand by June . . . if and when . . .

" In that family she'll do what her husband tells her to do. It runs in families—that domineering spirit. That spirit which says : ' Save yourself ! ' " He said this fiercely, his mouth twisting with irony. She didn't like him in hard mood. She thought : " No one should be hard on me now ; I'm pregnant ; and I don't feel well. " She murmured, leaning against him : " We'll stand together ? "

" If a stand has to be made . . . of course we're together. "

How could a man say less ?

" We've been together . . . here, " she said. And then she began to repeat the dates ; and he could not but confirm them. She paused ; and said slowly at the end of her shaken, breathless summary of their follies here : " We've been watched here too. Did you know that ? A red-haired man. "

" You're sure ? "

" Sure. He's been looking at houses in this neighbourhood. "

" I met him in the bar at the pub then, the other night, " Mayce said. " Actually he asked if this house was for sale. I said, of course, that all I knew about it was that it had been bought by a newly married couple. ' It's got such a lovely west view, ' he said. ' I've been walking round it quite a lot. On the other hand, there's a good house to let down the

hill.' I remembered he said that. So you noticed him too ?
The red-haired chap ? ”

“ Yes,” she said, hardly audibly. “ He’s our grocer’s brother.”

“ How do you know that ? ”

She said that the men had been talking when she went into the shop ; and the grocer had apologised for keeping her waiting a minute or two. “ He said he hadn’t seen his brother for some time. That is how I know who he is.”

“ So your grocer’s brother is a private detective.”

Silence fell between them. She was amazed and fearful. She felt a long way from Philip Mayce—yet there he stood looking at her, and she could not read what he was thinking. “ In about six months it will be born,” she said. “ It will soon show. . . . Everyone must know. Married a month and . . . ” When she faltered to a stop he asked : “ How long ago was it—Charles and Robert had that little week-end party ; just before the weddings ? ”

“ I’ve forgotten everything,” she said helplessly. “ Dates—everything——”

He calculated : “ Didn’t his mother suspect ? Didn’t anyone see ? ”

“ It didn’t show,” she said. “ I had only begun to be afraid. . . . I wasn’t even sick.”

“ Your engagement was very short.”

“ We all thought there wasn’t anything to wait for. . . . ”

“ If only I’d been near you then ! ”

“ You were in the Balkans.”

“ Yes. Thinking I’d make my fortune.”

“ You—you are famous now, Philip.”

“ You know that isn’t so. A little publicity ; a newspaper column ; a novel that ——”

She interrupted, crying : “ It went into three editions in two months.”

“ How large were the editions ? ” His lips curled in a sneer at himself.

"Well . . . But three ! "

"Looked well in the advertisements. You need to know the literary ropes, my poor small fool ! It kept a roof over my head for a few months, living cheap. But that's all. My second book has been sent back for alterations. You never think of all that, do you ? "

"No, I thought . . . "

"What the general public does think. . . . "

She said with a steadiness and acumen that he didn't expect her to show in the midst of her crucial anxiety : "I don't know what is going to happen. Now we've been watched."

"How do you know for certain ? We must go over this. . . . "

"I do know. By a thousand little things—not one is anything by itself. But when you leave tonight you will see I'm right."

He said—but not with that certainty of a passionate lover : "Come out with me. . . . 'Tonight."

"No," she said. "I have a lot of things to think of. I'm worried sick. But anyway, the child, born in wedlock, will be Charles's."

"Yes. Your husband is the legal father. We were careless not to think of all these damned muddles. . . . "

"I must have the child born in wedlock. . . . Charles must let that happen, anyhow."

"I will stay near you," he said sullenly. "If you want me I must be with you."

"I want you not to desert me."

"As if . . . as if . . . My God ! "

"I don't doubt you. I know you will stay near me. Only I don't know what he is doing—nor how he is doing it."

"If he is doing anything at all' . . . about things."

• Now both know that they regretted.

She regretted Mayce had ever come near her.

He regretted her.

Both regretted the perhaps sordid difficulties and worries that seemed inevitable. "You were going to Italy," she said, tremulously.

"I promise ; not now."

She went to the curtained windows which looked out into the garden, and over the low wall to the main road. She moved a curtain an inch and saw, in the moonlight, against a tree, a figure. She let the curtain fall back. And then in a minute she drew it again an inch aside. The figure was gone. "Go now," she said. "There was someone—but he has gone." They kissed—but with fear and pity ; not passion. He left the house, skirting it in the shadows ; but as he left the garden a tall figure was crossing the road—and standing to light a cigarette. He began to walk quickly towards his hotel ; and Charles Wycombe's car drove by him. In the car was Charles himself ; but not looking for him. Oh no. His sleuth did that work.

Mayce had no doubt as to Charles Wycombe's intentions. And he cast about in his mind again the possibility of clearing out—to Italy ; and then to any one of half a dozen countries, where he could continue his work. But, no. He couldn't go. The newspapers would have the case which he now had no doubt that Wycombe would bring—and even in his own interests he must cut a decent figure. A man might appear—to the public sympathy—as co-respondent ; but never as the man who ran away. He could imagine entering his club and having men turn from him. In fact—it depended on how the case was presented—he would probably find his membership cancelled if he did not stay to protect the woman he had loved. Yes, loved. And with the word he halted and looked back. The car was out of sight. The husband would be with the wife now ; and how would their greeting go ?

"He would ring her up tomorrow—when it was safe to assume that the husband would be away to business again.

She had gone.

A note had been left for him at the hotel, though. It had come by hand—rush of her! It was brief.

"He has driven me up to Town to stay with Mother till everything is over. I've told Mother I must see you. Wait.—June."

He had seen Mother once. And he hated the prospect of seeing her again; with her anger roused; or, worse, with the whole story elicited from June. Well, he had his chief editor to see, and that gave him time to decide.

He went up as usual, that morning.

It sickened him to go to that flat to which he had now and then addressed letters to June to be forwarded. For the blowsy woman who was her mother was now not only hostile but insistent on examination and cross-examination. June was out shopping—on taking his further telephone call the mother had sent her out. They sat alone—he and this fat peroxidized woman who was all June's protection save himself. Charles had suddenly made himself most clear.

"Sit down, Mr. Mayce—if I must ask you to sit down in my flat. I have sent her out." He sat down, looking stubborn as a man feels on cross-examination and female scolding. She looked him over while she talked.

And she talked. It was a torrent of anger and apprehension—with common sense as background. She said crudely that the husband was providing for his wife if she stayed here with her mother in safety, till after the child was born.

"'Child'? Mr. Mayce! The doctor has seen her—she's going to a nursing-home of course—he had her X-rayed; and he says it is almost certainly twins, Mr. Mayce! That poor girl! I daren't tell her; and the doctor won't. As Charles has said—and I think he's brutal—the way he talks to a mother—these are no twins in his family; there surely aren't any in mine! Is your family liable to twins, Mr. Mayce?"

He actually couldn't deny it! She sat flaming: "Your sister and an aunt both had them. . . . On your side then! What is she going to do with twins? Of course you'll be married as soon as Charles divorces her!"

"When is he divorcing her?"

"After the confinement. At least he has the grace for that. In fact I own my son-in-law is a badly treated man. . . . Though, of course, he's a man of terrible temper. Like his father. . . . I've been able to enquire about the late Mr. Wycombe! A selfish man and with a fierce temper——"

"That doesn't help this interview—which I'll be glad to cut short if you will."

"You and she—with twins; illegitimate."

"We don't bother about these words so much now, days."

"Don't bother about anything, I should say! Who's going to pay for the nursing-home and all of the things that will be needed? I'd like to know that!"

"I believe"—he grew every moment more and more stiff with the outrageous woman who was the only person to whom June could turn—"that is the duty of the husband. He hasn't started his proceedings yet! And they will be born in wedlock."

"That's the one good thing about this awful tragedy. *Awful tragedy*, I said!" She paused to look at him. "She's provided for. . . . If it were left to me, all I could do would be to book a bed in a maternity ward. But Charles—I'll say this—isn't sparing with the luxuries."

"You think me sparing then?"

"You! You don't come in yet! You'll come in quite enough for your liking as soon as she is up and about again. Poor child! What a prospect for her! She says she will refuse to defend; and won't appear in court."

"If that's how she wants it, I concur, of course. No defence. . . ."

"Yes! That'll let you out easily, won't it? But what of her? *What of her, I say!*"

"I shall do my best for her. . . ."

"She wouldn't have married Charles, I daresay—she'd have thought twice—if it hadn't been for you letting her in for this! When she found out about his temper. . . ."

"She would! It was a damn good match for her! And I was abroad. . . ."

"Safely off, I daresay you thought!"

"I was sent on a special assignment."

"I wanted to go to your chief editor—but she wouldn't have that. . . . When she met Charles Wycombe it had been love at first sight with him. . . . 'I wish I'd met Charles first,' she kept saying to me. Well, all that's why I didn't raise any fuss when I knew she slept with Charles. Ordinarily I wouldn't approve; I don't believe in such laxity! But it was different."

"Different, yes. Wycombe's taking it pretty well," he said in a low voice.

"He has sent June to me; and he pays. He pays well." Suddenly she said: "I'll get you a cup of tea. She's going to a *matinée* as well. She won't be in."

He stood up while she rose and went out of the untidy room.

All the writer's sense of drama, pathos and humour had risen in him as he talked with her. A complete figure of derision, she yet had her courage and tenacities. She had love in her. She was not dried by life—nor afraid of it. She took untoward circumstances as they came; she loved her wayward daughter, and put herself aside. And suddenly he, who had enjoyed a wayward and selfish youth, who would have liked now to shelve the responsibility he had brought upon himself, saw in her that beauty of spirit—of which she was unconscious, though she possessed and automatically exercised it. It was the very quality of love. This unprepossessing, ill-controlled woman had the quality in great store.

She could love. And her love would not be light and

short of memory—it would be with her even if the object of her dearest love was no more. She represented the love of humanity ; and suddenly as he looked into her too-fat face, under her tightly and formally dressed hair, he knew it. She would take a lost dog to her heart or a grieving child to her arms ; and make for either what happy place she could.

He stood before her humbly, with a slight rueful smile. Even her words—" He pays ; and he pays well "—meant that she did not condemn any who paid his debts—and something over. There was justice here.

And he felt suddenly weak of character and performance ; any vanity he had floated away in ashes.

What could he do ? He could not pay ; and pay well . . . Not even in responsibility to the girl ; and the coming child . . .

His small literary and artistic pretensions fell away. It was life itself in which he must shine.

She came in again, with a tea tray. Bewildered, tired, haggard by anxiety, yet she shone. And she gave him—just as if he had not made her suffer—a cup of tea. She handed a plate with a few fancy biscuits on it and said, with a sweet smile of agony : " We must eat, mustn't we ? "

He could only drink his tea.

Did he want to marry her daughter, after a divorce case—and the chief editor of the paper who gave him his best jobs calling him in for a merciless interview—and all of the reverberations ? Did he ?

He knew he did not. June to him was no more than any other girl—except that she had succumbed to his first ardent love-making. She had meant a girl to him ; not a wife. When she became formally engaged to Charles Wycombe so soon after she discovered what was to happen to her, he had been glad. Neither of them risked abortion. " That isn't safe," he had said distractedly. She would have taken the risk—women were gamblers ; but Charles Wycombe had made it unnecessary.

He looked into the mother's unexpectedly shrewd eyes.

"I can get a job which will take me away," he said.

"Is that all you can do for her?"

The insignificant eyes fixed on his face; but they were insignificant no longer. They were a steady blaze of light. She was not angry; but she expected more of him. He dwindled.

"I'll marry her if I get the chance."

Now he had said it with those eyes on him. And then, with her smile, he saw that her motherhood was for him too. She understood; forgave; accepted.

"How's your tea?" she enquired mildly.

"Good," he said huskily.

Tonight he was going to a literary *soirée*. Distinguished people were going to be there. He had been thinking about it, in spite of his preoccupations. He had wondered if he would be asked to make an impromptu speech—he had not, of course, been put on the short rota of speakers for tonight. He had not reached yet that notoriety in letters. He would loiter on the fringes of more successful people's success. But he might be ready with something felicitous if called upon. It might be that his editor-in-chief would be there; notice him. "So Mayce has been asked," would be the thought in the great man's mind. It would be to his advantage.

But marrying June would disadvantage him.

He said suddenly: "Do you know, I am certain she does not love me now. If I could get sent away, do you think Wycombe would forget things—take her back——"

"He hasn't put her away yet; officially, she is with him——"

"He has served divorce papers?"

Now the maternal eyes were steady. She cried: "You will get your papers soon—if you haven't had them yet."

A long silence between them. He said: "Charles Wycombe is a cruel brute. Why should you want her to stay with him?"

"Because she is better with him than with you. And after this baby she must . . . must . . . manage better. Marriage wants a lot of management, you know."

"Yes. I had hoped to keep out of it."

She was leading the way into the tiny hall. Yes, she had been kind ; but this was tentative dismissal. He went to the room he rented by the night when in Town. That evening he dressed with care, and hoped that his editor would forget any uncertain thoughts about him. He might be asked to cover the Mandanian crisis—that would mean going abroad ; he would be out of the country before the divorce was heard.

The literary party was all he could have hoped. Distinguished company ; elegance. Women were delightful to him. Someone flattered him about his article in the *Morning Leader*. The champagne sparkled and brought gaiety. Here he could forget a frightened girl pregnant with twins. Twins ! That news, given so quietly by the mother appalled him.

Where was the glow of romance which, though illicit, might have had a certain glamour in the reporting ? Twins—people laughed at twins. Should he go and see her by and by—in that nursing home ?

No. And this was for her sake ; not his.

No.

A pretty Italian princess asked for him to be introduced. She was charming, and a great success with men here. He flowered. He shone. He drew laughs with his wit. The editor of the *Morning Leader* looked at him, nodding his greeting. All the delightful people were talking hard—no one advertised himself or herself ; they advertised each other. He could hear fragments ; he tossed back fragments of his own. "Why, Mayce ! Why hide yourself : I want to congratulate you. . . ." "Why, I've been trying to get near you to congratulate you on your novel ; it is on my desk for review. . . ." "Don't slay it, Mayce. . . ." "Slay one of the

best books I've been favoured with for a very long time. . . ."

"My dear fellow, really ? . . ."

"Really, I'm honoured to say. . . ."

Purrs came from smiling faces above pleasantly scratched backs.

He had forgotten the pleasantness of all this—was fairly new to it on this scale, anyway. The princess wore a green frock which curled round her alluring figure as closely as a snake. The mind flew—if with reluctance—to poor little June—big and blurred—in a bed at a nursing-home. When it happened should he or should he not send flowers ?

She would prefer—for prudence' sake—that he should not send any. Just in case her husband relented. . . . He fixed this firmly in his mind. And, of course, it was out of the question that he should go and see her. . . .

The princess was giving a short musical party in her small house later ; and wanted his escort home. "Pleasure ! Pleasure !"

"In half an hour ?"

"Half an hour, Princess."

He was being, this evening, a social success. Men gave him a knowing smile.

Who among the gay folk there knew what ate at his chivalrous heart ?

It is likely that this evening—there had been a few—if any—such in his life—settled his future, as far as June was concerned ; although he would not tell himself so.

His editor-in-chief was coming on too, from the party ; bringing his wife. And now he had something to say in Mayce's ear.

"I want to send you to cover the American story—you know which I mean ? I will talk more frankly in my office tomorrow morning. You are at liberty, I hope ?"

"Yes, sir. A journalist is always at liberty when his chief calls him. A big story, sir ?"

"Yes. You can do it. About eleven then."

"Eleven o'clock, sir."

What a break ! He couldn't and wouldn't refuse ! And poor little June ? Let things simmer, and Charles would take her back. In Mayce's unavoidable absence the matter would be adjusted. . . . How easily the thoughts—which were hopes—slipped along !

He stayed till the party was breaking up, gently, little groups at a time. Then he thought it more dignified to go—he said his adieux to his host and hostess ; encountered the princess actually waiting.

His escort was hers. . . . His further presence impossible.

"I'm afraid I'm going on. . . ." How pleasantly that came ! A social man indeed. He was merely going to his own by no means luxurious quarters—but the princess did not know that. "The De Valles ?" she asked jealously at his elbow, as the taxicab waited before her door. He knew, of course, that the De Valles were diplomatic people over from South America. He had no invitation.

"I'm going to *try* to look in," he said ruefully, "but I've a couple of other invitations I can't anyhow slip out of."

"I'm giving a big political thing soon ; I must send you a card if you will come. . . ."

"Well, I could hope to. . . . Good night, Princess ; good night."

He kissed her hand with charm.

He hurried. His mind was fixed on that summons to his editor in the morning. He had no doubts now about going. A journalist of his calibre could not refuse. The short journey down to Hampton in the train seemed endless. All he wanted tonight was his shabby shelter. And at last he was there. It had been a pity to miss the princess' *soirée*—but he would write a letter stressing that he had an urgent special assignment after all the social affairs. . . . If there was time he would send this by hand with flowers.

And as he thought of June he reassured himself that she had that mother. That mother made of milk and honey

and . . . and . . . all sustenance. They were not quite penniless people. He was justified ; and he told himself he knew that June would say so. She would look towards their future, which would be upheld on his shoulders. . . .

The next morning he was in Fleet Street betimes. Men passed him here and there in the great office building, and more than one said he was lucky.

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. And a page-boy called him into the great man's office.

It was a pleasant interview. Cordial ; heart-warming. "You'll have some social stuff to do, I daresay," said the practised man of Fleet Street, watching Mayce. "But I gather you don't mind that."

"All in the job, sir. Fairly good party last night, I thought . . . the princess is a live wire."

"Well, you know enough about it now. There's a berth for you in the *Doric*. I'm told she isn't full—they'll offer you better accommodation on the strength of your assignment before you're long at sea. Can you make your goodbyes and all that pretty damn quick. . . ."

"When do you expect me back, sir ?"

"Soon as the job is done to our satisfaction. May be quite a time. . . . Nine months possibly. Too long for you ?"

"Not at all, sir !"

"Well, free man, eh ? That's partly why we picked you—only partly, though."

"Yes. I keep my freedom, sir. Though it's damn hard sometimes."

A brief laugh. He went down in the lift. Nine months. . . . He was as good as away. He returned at once to his quarters, packed carefully all he had—there was no surplus to leave—and said "goodbye" to the proprietor and his wife ; paid up everything and a week's advance in lieu of notice ; was in London again ; soon to catch the fast train to Southampton.

And he had not seen June.

He would not write ; he telephoned from the station. A charwoman answered him. A message would do, then. " Just tell Mrs. Wycombe I'm called away and can't be back for some weeks ; I will get in touch with her as soon as I return. She will know who it is. . . . "

So, down to Southampton ; to the ship, and when she began to slide from the docks, the tugs pulling her, at last he was free ! He realised that the past few weeks had been a nightmare.

He could hardly believe his luck

Mayce's mission was to take six to nine months.

He felt free and almost gay. He was a very good bridge player indeed ; an excellent dancer ; kind to old people travelling. He would soon be quietly popular ; and then someone—a cute stewardess or steward or some passenger—would say : " Why, that's Philip Mayce ! See his name everywhere. . . . " This he might not be able to avoid. Nor, before the ship parted from her tugs, and sailed on alone into wider waters, did he avoid it.

But neither did he avoid something else. One of the tugs had stayed with them, falling back to the ship's side. The tug drew under her bows, and up a rope ladder swarmed a nimble man with a letter for a passenger. The ship seemed to ride at ease for those few moments. Then the visitor was beside Mayce as he leaned over the bulwarks. " My word, I nearly missed you, sir. A last message. " A long envelope was put into his hand, and the visitor said : " The gangway was drawn up when I got to the dock. That motor-boat you see there brought me to the tug. My word ! A close shave ! But I always deliver the goods. " He went over the side and down the rope ladder like an acrobat. Mayce looked at the envelope. He opened it.

He had been served with divorce papers.

He did not read them before he was again in his cabin.

"This is a civil action," he said to himself—though shaken. "They can't force me to go back." He looked at the legal address at the head of the letter and decided to do the correct thing ; to radio. There was no use trying to dodge it. He thought it all over, and then, when the ship was fairly out to sea, he did it. He radioed to the lawyers involved. Procrastination, he thought. She has her home—by rights—till he wins his case—if he's going to win. He can't take that away from her. No. He can't take that. She's safe, he thought ; and a sense of grievance rose hot in his mind.

Women !

He radioed also to a lawyer he knew ; a small man so far ; who had been at school with him ; and arranged that he would take care of the petty preliminaries involved. The lawyer would like to appear in a case involving Philip Mayce ! Thus did he twist and plan ; and with the radio to his own lawyer his vanity rose to soothe his apprehension ; the vanity of the minor poet ; the minor artist ; the minor man.

He sent the princess a radio too ; for he was missing another party.

He rather thought that she would be extremely interested ; and more, sympathetic. Warmly sympathetic. "That you should be drawn into this—just because of what every man does," he could imagine her saying.

He would have answered with gloom : "Well, I'm a freak, then. I can't let a woman down." Then the princess would cry warmly that it is never the man's fault . . . and then . . . and then. . . .

He won at bridge.

It was pleasant being "discovered". People looked at him ; wanted his acquaintance ; offered to show him New York ; invited him down to their Long Island homes for week-ends. "I'm damned if any of it was worth while," he said to himself, remembering June and her frightened face.

He remained sufficiently aloof, however, as befitted a man of letters.

Someone told his fortune. "Women are your trouble. You are too chivalrous. . . . Can't you harden your heart?"

"It's difficult," he smiled. "You women have a way of getting a man into a corner."

In New York he went to a lawyer of international reputation. "If you're badgered or threatened to make you go back, let me know," the lawyer said, studying him. "I'll write and ask for time, till your commission for your newspaper is over. But I don't think they can insist on your return till you're ready."

"She is having a child shortly."

"Whose? Now I ask that with the best of intentions. Just tell me. Whose?"

"Why—er—why, her husband's, I suppose."

"If you can put off the divorce the child will be born in wedlock. The husband's responsible. We've got to make decent commonsense laws about that. A premature baby is a premature baby—not by any means rare—and with all this to upset the young lady——"

"Medical opinion has been that it's twins."

"What! What!" And with this their laughter brimmed over.

Mayce left the office comforted in some wise. And now he could turn to his job, which he did expertly, making many good-natured friends. It was a hearty, good-natured country, he told himself. And then he began to carry out the errand with which he had been entrusted. He was, for one thing—the big reason for his trip—to study Big Business in the States—particularly the steel business—and the labour situation. This so easily brought him into pertinacious touch with Bertie Falaise, brother of the famous young actress who was making herself notable in two continents. A good contact for Mayce. Plenty of rich ripe

copy there—even leaving out the main reasons for contacting this brilliant and masterful young man.

Lunching out—with or without company—once visiting a Long Island home one week-end, dancing with heiresses; hobnobbing with other newspaper men and women, he picked up quite a bit about this fellow, who, they said, had come over with high qualifications—and with an inborn talent for engineering and with ideas in his head which had made two rival firms start competing for his services before long. Just down to his last cent, he had walked the streets of cities, making his way in; and look at the boy now! First just a young fellow in the twenties, taken on trial, with a workman's wage; then up and up. That aero engine of his! . . . That hetroscope invention! . . . Then in the great firm who had taken notice from the beginning. . . . Now a junior partner. "One or two of us have been after him," said the newspaper men, "but he was close. And if he did let you in, he wanted practically to write your copy for you. Oh, quite a fellow!"

Then: "Of course there was high society; it all helps; there was Mrs. Falaise. . . ."

The smiles widened; but were discreet enough.

Mayce sat that evening with three or four—the number kept changing as a man would rise, saying: "Got to be going along", and then you would find yourself between two more who sat down in his place. All talkative and friendly. The scene was the Brevoort.

"Of course there was Mrs. Falaise!"

"A regular mother to him."

"Nuts! Still, if a young feller gets a woman to love and cherish him, it takes care of things. That's ten—twelve years ago. A score of years is a day in this town! . . . Well, she's put on a bit of weight; not quite the siren now; took the changing years like the woman she is! She's a regular mother to him. And then when he brought Frances along . . . None of us quite know just when—and it's harder to

keep a secret from the newspaper feller in this town than you'd think. Well, see, those two are just Mrs. Falaise's dear son and daughter now. She lets water find its level ; she lets things slip along naturally. And when the autumn comes—she knows. She takes it."

"That's how it is."

"But Frances Falaise ?"

"She's just Mrs. Falaise's dear daughter. You see, Mrs. Falaise didn't ever have any children."

"Mrs. Falaise was Follett's girl friend for quite a time. But, as I say, the autumn comes. Anyway, Frances inherits. . . ."

"Life's hard on women," said Mayce with a worldly-wise air. "I've always thought so."

"Of course Frances has a son ; schoolboy. Mrs. Falaise is dear Grannie and loves it. Happy home in Connecticut."

"Married, then ? I mean Frances Falaise."

"Who knows anything about that ?"

"Is Mrs. Falaise very hard to contact ?"

"They said briefly : "Impossible."

"They don't like me," Mayce said to himself. "I shall go to see Mrs. Falaise."

This contact did not come on his direct line of work ; but women liked him. The aloof lady would ask him for a weekend. . . . It would be the introduction to a society which he had not yet attained. No one here had fallen down and worshipped the brilliant newspaperman. When he left his temporary friends at the Brevoort, he got the telephone operator at his hotel to contact the house in Connecticut. A voice answered ; the voice, he judged, of an accomplished manservant. And after a few moments, during which permission was asked and evidently given, a woman's voice spoke ; low, beautiful ; kind ; yet cold for a stranger. And he said he represented one of Britain's most important newspapers ; had been asked—in addition to his other commitment for which he had come over—to contact the mother

of Frances Falaise who had made an immense success in London. "I do not care to give interviews," said the beautiful cold voice, "but if you like to arrive about eleven tomorrow morning I could, I think, squeeze it in among my other arrangements. But do be prompt, please."

"I will. Thank you."

This big country, with its vast store of talent, creation, power, reduced him a little, he found. But he wanted to make an impression of the right sort with this Mrs. Falaise. He had already, in talk with his acquaintances so recently, smelt out scandal. This Mrs. Falaise, once the mistress of Follett the theatrical bigwig, and then, in her later years, the *chère amie* of a man young enough to be her son—a very pretty situation. Not that it could make more than a dinner-table story—just as those two men had half told it to him—but knowledge was always something. Stored away in the mind often it had its uses when brought out and carefully aired. He would like to know something of Mrs. Falaise's marriage, though. Who had been her first husband, for example? He would know that—he assured himself confidently—before he was through with her tomorrow.

His expenses were liberal. He took a car out to Connecticut, to the sprawling, entrancing fishing village to which the rich came, and built their lovely holiday homes. He made all enquiries he could make about it of the chauffeur, who was a mine of information. And so he found himself on useful ground when he arrived primed for taking impressions.

The timeless luxury of this rich simple home impressed him—whereas he had wanted to impress. There were two women sitting on the large porch, and he took them in with a reporter's glance. Both sat in rocking-chairs—just rocking slightly.

He had no idea Djana Wycombe was one.

• She had been asked down this time because Frances Falaise's son had come home for the holidays; and Mrs. Falaise, having been attracted by this quiet kind woman,

had given her her heart's desire. For some reason this Mrs. Wycombe wanted to see this boy.

Now introductions were made.

"Wycombe?"

And he said to himself: "Junc's mother-in-law . . . by all unholy coincidences. . . ."

Now he was more than interested. But, all the same, he would not let her know a thing about himself—this kind quiet woman born, he thought, of a class which sophisticated them in the very womb. She would know too much about him. . . . From her cradle she had been taught the things he had never known.

And then, as they sat there, a manservant came out with a tray of cocktails—a selection; iced and potent. "How damnably pleasant and how I envy them," murmured his subconscious mind. As he chose his at Mrs. Falaise's invitation, he thought he would not stay to lunch even if asked.

He was not asked; being taken as just a stranger who had dropped in for his own purpose. "Of course you understand," said Mrs. Falaise charmingly, "I can't talk about my daughter. Her publicity is not in my hands. But you can just take a photograph of me if you like. And . . ."

Diana moved her chair away, smiling. But just then a horse's hoofs sounded, cantering over the dry grass; a boy of perhaps nine years cantered up, and drew rein—a boy tall for his age; slim but hard. A beautiful boy, bareheaded; his straw-coloured hair bleached by the sun. The Falaise's son? . . . If so, this was a scoop—for where and who was—or had been—her husband?

"My grandson," said Mrs. Falaise, watching him; and she knew the thought in his mind, and he knew she knew. The thing he could not guess was just how she knew. But there she sat, almost the great lady; with Mrs. Wycombe, also a great lady—that was, when contrasted with himself. He jumped up as if impulsively, ran down the three shallow

steps, and was beside the boy on the pony. "I say, sonny, you've got a great pony here!" and he laid a hand on the pony's neck.

The boy's eyes enquired courteously.

"This is . . ." A faint hesitation as if she recalled his name with difficulty. . . . "This is Mr. Mayce, an English writer, I think?" Then Mrs. Falaise smiled charmingly. She could do it all—if she chose. But she had chosen only one smile for him, now that the boy had come.

The boy's hand hesitated for Mayce's hand, Mayce gripped it. Then he patted the pony—a lovely creamy chestnut—not red—with high-spirited far-looking eyes; so that you saw he was a pony with whom to be on a mountain trail, in a desert, lost in rough land with a river in spate to swim. Mayce was the inferior of this pony, and he knew it as he always felt his inferiorities. So that he felt the pony needed discipline which he would have enjoyed giving—to show him who was tops—himself or the Englishwoman.

"Good morning, sir," said the boy. His voice was young and fearless.

"At your age," Mayce remembered, "I was in terror of life; I was of no account. And these two women who smile so sweetly at you can make me feel it, remember it—without even trying."

He turned to the women on the verandah. Behind them spacious rooms were indicated; and a sound of invisible servitors came, laying a table perhaps. Doves cooed in the trees; the colours of the flowers caressed the verandah. Conversation trickled very gently. . . .

"Well," he said, looking at his wristwatch, "I must be off."

• Mrs. Falaise murmured indifferently of lunch.

He looked her in the eyes. "Afraid I can't—but it has been so nice of you to let me have this pleasure." . . . *You*

old barlot : You're Follett's leadings!" he wanted to cry brutally. For his temper—never easy—rose in him. But he had not learned to please. And he made his adieux *very* ably ; at leisure and yet as if with the next appointment in his mind.

"I'm off to lunch with X," he said, mentioning an editorial name which carried weight and prestige. "I'm afraid I could only just look in. . . ."

"Oh," she said with pleasure. "Tell him from me that the pigeons have settled in as he said they would. That is if you remember. . . ."

"My memory is equal to that, dear lady." And he went off cursing himself. He should not have mentioned the editor. But who could have known that she knew him too ? Risk nothing : so he thought. And smiling, he got into the hired car and was driven back to New York. He hadn't done very well for his money after all.

He had, of course, by now written fully to the London lawyers about the divorce case. He had mailed the papers to them ; and stated that he wanted to postpone the case ; or . . . just possibly it might be called off . . . a child coming. He could not afford big lawyers. His plea of necessary business absence was good enough to go on with.

But suppose it was heard in his absence ?

Suppose it went against June and him ? Just suppose it ? Of all things he dreaded facing it through ; and then marrying her. He was a congenital bachelor. All his tastes ran to bachelorhood.

And that mother of hers—June had no assets ! No money ; no social weight. She was one of those many girls who drift into luck in life. The girls who acquire poise and worldly wisdom—heaven knew how ! They made a good showing—easy for a girl ! They took " nice " jobs—pocket-money jobs. Full of lovely young charms—and with a keen

eye for a good husband, they married. It was up to such to be good wives. They hadn't the social training—now he began to see his own social position as far superior to hers—for the carrying on of amorous adventures. 'Some harder-headed girls achieved it.'

And no doubt but that Wycombe was a queer-tempered, overbearing fellow.

He gathered that Wycombe's father had been such a one. But now he had seen for himself—on Mrs. Falaise's porch, against the background of that enviable house, those lovely gardens—that June's mother-in-law, the late Wycombe's wife, was the only kind of wife for such a man. She had put him first. . . . And he himself, a coming man, mixing in literary society, soon to be lionised—wasn't he, in his way, of the same temperament as the deceased Wycombe? What he should marry was a young replica of that serene graceful woman, trained to please.

A man on the road to artistic fame. . . . Now he knew—away from her, and with a clear mind—that June was not the wife for him.

She had her awful mother—that patient dedicated woman.

He did not want children. They domesticated the landscape.

They distracted a wife's attention from where it should be—giving adoration to a man of genius. Let the other men have them—the stockbrokers; the close lawyers; the bovine farmers; the general *canaille*. . . .

He thought all this as the car swept along. New York, unapprised of his coming, must soon recognise his presence. He saw how people lived here—barring the mass of the indeterminates; the men who caught religiously the same train home each day; or the same bus; who were enslaved to wives. . . .

He walked New York when he had paid off the car—one certainly wanted money here; the fare made him flinch. He walked and walked—the stranger. He scaled the heights

above the Hudson, and saw wealthy houses. Look at the Palisades ! He descended to Fifth Avenue again. Then through to Park Avenue. Then back to Washington Square where the artists were to be found, he had heard. . . . There were little restaurants, filled with diners. He dined, at one, alone :

The proprietor came and looked him over, making conversation designed to find out who he was—for he certainly had some sort of air about him, even if it stemmed only from a big belief in himself. The proprietor moved away to talk to a table where there were two luscious girls with their escorts. And Mayce's big belief—for some desolate reason—grew cold. He was just a stranger with only the money in his pocket which the paper paid him ; and no friends.

He thought back, again, to Mrs. Falaise's place. It had the air of thorough desirability ; a place where fine people would come and everyone would be at ease. It was to be a very long time before Mayce learned the ways of that simplicity. Now all he tried to feel about it was contempt.

" Sneer at what you can't reach. Refuse loudly what life withholds from you. Thus he felt he guarded himself. He was conscious of himself all the time. Partly it was pleasure in himself ; partly loneliness that none sat with him ; wanted his company. He ate a wonderful steak and drank a bottle of wine, knowing that he must, as from tomorrow, conserve his resources. He walked out alone and felt eyes on him. That was a tonic ; he was conscious of looking all over the Englishman—and they probably put him down as a man of title—aloof, needing none of them. . . . Or did they just say—for he heard a laugh follow him from one side of the restaurant : " What a sap ! "

The one thing he suddenly knew was that he would not go to Mrs. Falaise's house again ; nor again meet Diana Wycombe. He knew that that quiet fiftyish woman would have no difficulty in contacting her like ; and he felt again that vanity of humiliation which made him hate to feel

himself inferior to any man on earth. He was unaware that his humiliation rose from his disappointment with himself. Disappointment was in his soul ; it ate his heart. So soon his soul would be a wandering lost thing, and the good in his heart would die of bewilderment.

The two women—the real grandmother and the supplanter—had taken lunch together, with the fine boy, with his straight eyes and the straight body—a beautiful boy, who had no memory of his coming in the squalor and terror of a tenement room in the teeming streets of a near ghetto. He knew only of valiant and beautiful things—and was to learn more. The two women had planned it—his mother and his grandmother both, as far as he knew. The adoption did not trouble this boy. Presently Follett would tell him perhaps ; but by then he would be strong enough to withstand any mischief or corruption.

Diana would stay. And she fell asleep—her mind at rest—to the murmur of the sea ; and the imagination of the boy's dreams ; and she thought she heard him breathing—though that was impossible.

She would stay in this country just until Frances Falaise's first night was over. Just till then ; and after that night she would go home—to see what had happened ; to talk to Morris. And she thought of Morris differently before she slept.

She thought that she would like to put her hand into his faithful hand ; and go the rest of the road of life with him.

It had all been easy here—so long as she kept silence. And now silence was a habit with her. Not difficult ; not painful ; so long as she knew her dear ones were safe ; so long as they did not tear up all to which they had set their hands. Just let the first night of Irene's play—Frances was still her Irene—be over in triumph ; and she would hurry home.

Defeated ?

No. Not defeated. This would not be defeat. True, there was no crumb for her ; no love ; no laughter shared ; she stood outside the lives of her children ; just observing ; not claiming. Even not commenting except with pleasure and admiration. She had never led them ; and it was not the time to begin now.

“ My friends in New York must call on you,” said Mrs. Falaise.

Diana was leaving. It had been a happy two days. She was never to have this grandson ; but she could watch, listen for, his progress. Far away, the echo of his footsteps on his path would come to her. That week-end she had watched him, enraptured. And Mrs. Falaise watched her.

Mrs. Falaise came up to New York when her daughter came home, with cameramen taking pictures, with reporters swarming on to the ship ; and she did not see Mrs. Wycombe, who mingled with the crowd at the docks. It was not that she did not expect her ; for instinct told her that the Englishwoman would be down to meet the ship. She herself had a pass to go on board ; and the reporters and cameramen were busy with her too. She looked radiant and lovely—the sort of mother of a star who should meet a star. And quietly Diana waited in the crowds ; content to watch. In another fortnight the play would open ; she would be there. And then it would be she who walked on to a ship to go home. She was aware of a tallish man who edged into the crowd and spoke to an official of the line—a shore official. And the official was ready, after glancing at a card, to let him on to the ship.

Yes. Philip Mayce was allowed to board her—he had presented himself to the editor who had taken some interest in him ; who had commissioned an article or two—and who had lackadaisically agreed this occasion might be good for a

few special lines. *An English writer meets Miss Falaise with a play in his pocket. Philip Mayce admires our theatres.*

He had bought six copies of the paper this morning, the stuff went to his head. A fellow had already interviewed him on it.

"Well, and I will write one for her while I'm here." And he remembered the divorce papers. "I'll tear 'em up; who says I've got to go back? Nobody knows out here, and nobody cares."

There Frances was, fair, enchanting. She knew how to arrive too. The fellow with her was, of course, Follett. He'd have to be skilfully opportune with his slightest chances. Best thing would be to get her somehow alone—get her tempted to listen to his idea—he'd have the right idea by then. . . .

They were passing; she now with her arms full of exotic flowers. The photographers were busy. He pushed to get near and come into the picture; others had the idea too and he was pushed back. They were gone; disappearing into a big limousine. That was Mrs. Falaise following along close. Her car, perhaps? Well, he knew her. Could he push near enough to speak? To say, laughing: "You're happy today, Mrs. Falaise?" Then he could write it up; and say how, when he was with her at her charming home in Connecticut, he had been chaffing her on her absentmindedness; and she had said: "I can think of nothing till Frances comes home." And it was he who had been able to tell her, chatting together, the personal angle of her daughter's great London first night. That he hadn't been lucky enough to get a Press ticket for that night still rankled; but never mind, who'd know?

He had failed then; he failed here, now. He could not get near the car. . . . He went back to his little hotel room. Hot as hell, there in town; the roar of the elevated seeming never to cease, though, of course, there was a small relief of quiet between trains. He paced up and down. Presently he'd

eat at an automat—good cheap ways they had here ; though the pace was tremendous ; tremendous and senseless.

Only, he must stay.

He knew now that he simply could not stand having to go through a divorce case ; and marry June. Marry that mother ! For now he didn't push the mother into oblivion ; he had had a glimpse of her as the female animal which will fight for its young, fair means and foul. It would be the mother who would trap him and pin him down. Those sort of people held on for all they could get—alimony if he had to marry—and desert—June ; maintenance for child. . . . If he wouldn't marry her, think of the stink ! Newspaper offices would be all one big deep-freeze when he walked into them. . . . Men wouldn't call out to him jovially—even, sometimes, admiringly ; they would turn away, and become one big deep-freeze. *The Man Who Ran Away*. He knew the very columnist who would be detailed to write it up. And just as he owned that was the way he should head it himself, if called upon to write it, his telephone rang. He picked up the receiver.

It was the lawyer whom he had consulted a short while ago. A short while ? Well, think now. . . . Altogether he had been over here over two months . . . over three months, counting the voyage. And suddenly he faced—and shrank from—the reality of June as she must be now—more than six-months pregnant, and allied with that mother in that flat—for she would have left the pretty house, wouldn't she ? Unless that mother was there also. . . .

“ Yes. I'm speaking. Philip Mayce.”

“ Well, Mr. Mayce, about that subject you discussed with me awhile ago. . . . Yes, time runs on, doesn't it ? My advice to you was to wait a short while. But now . . . Well, I think you'd better come and see me.”

“ I'll come right along now if that will do ? It will ? Good ! . . .” Then his journalist's vanity : “ Only just got in from meeting Frances Falaise and Follett. God ! She

looks wonderful ! Says she's pleased to be back, though good old London gave her a wonderful hand. Follett's full of beans, as usual——"

"In a quarter of an hour, then, Mr. Mayce."

The voice was gone. The telephone fell dead. He hung up. That lawyer ! Well, it would be better than walking down Fleet Street, into Newspaper House, and having men come up to him to quiz him ; or men turning away ostentatiously to their own business.

He straightened himself ; in the mirrors he looked well ; straight and bronzed. "Went down to Mrs. Falaise's this week-end," perhaps he would say, walking lithely in ; brushing his hand back over his hair. "I got burned up." Nonchalant. That was the attitude to begin with.

He went up to town—the lawyer was on Fifth Avenue—couldn't better that address, he had thought—and he was shown in at once. In the manner of the junior who showed him in he read something offhand ; disrespectful—or thought he did. He entered, brushing his hair back—that insouciant gesture.

The lawyer was seated at his desk, facing the door ; and in a second he had examined Mayce all over as he came in. Fellow was pliant ; but assertive. No more than averagely crooked—in a personal way. Good appearance. The lawyer had a letter on his desk.

"Sit down, Mr. Mayce. I have a letter readdressed from a London newspaper office. You gave my address to that office ?"

"Er—yes. I hope that it is in order."

"Quite—so long as you apprise me. In fact there are two letters which were sent on to you by this newspaper ; and addressed by them to you at my firm here. They have been a little delayed, as you would expect. Then a third letter was written, addressed directly to me. One supposes that the writer of that letter got this address from Newspaper House."

He handed the two letters to Mayce. "I have read the letter addressed to me. . . ."

Mayce flinched.

He pulled himself very straight. "Oh, really. May I ask who wrote it?"

"A very, very distressed woman, Mr. Mayce, a mother."

"Hell!" Mayce thought pettishly. He could see the blowsy bitch, slaving over June, her daughter. The lawyer was handing this other letter across the desk.

Mayce, under that scrutiny, had to read the scrawl. Of course, as he had thought, it was June's mother writing. And to this stranger! Well, she had no one else to whom to write; and she caught at the chance. What things had she said at the office? What had the editor-in-chief heard? It was unheard of, unforgivable, that she should go to the office; shout her grievance. . . .

"I'm much obliged to you for your trouble," he said, crumpling the letter in one hand. "I shall certainly take this up at once."

"If you are still requiring my advice——"

"I am," said Mayce. "Of course I am."

"I advise you to take responsibility—full responsibility—for anything you may have done. In short, if you are guilty, Mr. Mayce, put in a plea of guilty; own up; and ask for a postponement of the case if your business keeps you here awhile longer."

"You advise me to plead. . . ."

"I shall shoulder the responsibility of what you have done, and I think the case will proceed in your absence."

The lawyer watched Mayce; a half-smile on his face.

"Well, I don't want to return yet—business reasons, you understand."

"My dear Mr. Mayce, I understand your reasons fully. But I trust that as soon as you have officially replied to this charge you will write to the woman involved. She may be

feeling desperate—with you away . . . and a child—or twins—imminent. . . . The doctor expects twins. . . . They may have been born.”

“Supposing it—they—were born in wedlock . . . if I could not return at once. . . .”

The lawyer looked at him hard and long. “If born in wedlock—though she is proved guilty—they belong formally to her husband. You are thinking of postponing the case so that may happen?”

“It only occurred to me——”

“You hardly need a lawyer, Mr. Mayce! However, I will take up your assertion that you cannot finish your business here for some months—say three months? Or would two do?”

“Three might do.”

“When, then, would you start for home? When the news comes that the child is born?”

“Well . . . she would need a chance for recovery . . . to be ready for what might be rather an ordeal for her.”

“Having come through another ordeal—woman’s biggest; I am a very proud husband and father, Mr. Mayce—you think she might have had time to face this case?”

“I . . . I should be with her.”

“You have thought, I daresay, while we have been talking and perhaps before—that her husband might forgive her while you—let us say tarry—an old word. Is that so?”

“Well, since the child—or—children would be born in wedlock, he might make the best of it; and . . .”

“We will deal with the case on those surmises. You know the other party. He is a thoroughly eligible husband?”

“Thoroughly.”

“But you are sending an admission of guilt?”

“The guilt is already proved if I know Wycombe——”

“And how well do you know Mr. Wycombe?”

“Well enough. And I’ve heard of his father before him. When the Wycombes start something they go on with it.”

"I think you should defend unless you are sure you couldn't get away with it."

"I couldn't get away with it. The citation mentions times and places."

"All provable?"

"I think so. I'm trying to have the least publicity. My paper would not like it. A case that would just slip through wouldn't hurt me. At least, not much. I can get the reporting handled. Or an undefended case is hardly worth reporting. Big ones that I know of are coming on."

"Oh, then I see. And you'll marry her?"

"I should have to."

"You do not sound to me an enthusiastic lover."

"I am not."

"If she were my daughter I would tell her that she is better without you."

"She has only a hopeless old mother."

But then he remembered the mother's face. It was love's epitome. It held the grand virtues—it dropped its sometimes foolish mask and unfurled the flags of the spirit.

"I agree with you after all. You had best own up—and stay over here till you know what is going to happen after that."

"My brain is simply addled with worry. How can I do creative work with this trash crowding all over it?"

"I regret I can't say. I leave it to you. But I think I should get this letter written here and now."

So the letter was dictated; Mayce read it; cried his despair; accepted it; signed it; and the lawyer's secretary took it with instructions to airmail it at once.

"You can pay your fees as you go out, Mr. Mayce. Thank you. I hope the poor girl has an easy time of it—what is called an easy time."

"That's another thing which holds me up in my work. Of course I shall be thinking of her all the time."

Mayce stood up. He held out his hand, and the lawyer

did not take it, being busy with folding a paper unconnected with the case ; and sealing it. But for a long moment he looked Mayce straight in the eyes. A look that a man must try to shrug off ; and a look which made him hurry out.

He paid his fees. Just as if he had come in to get a signature witnessed—something trivial—his money must be paid over now. In the midst of his despair, he, Philip Mayce, the international writer, hunts for dollar bills and pieces of silver. The clerk had a slight protuberance of gum stuck in his cheek. His muscles moved over it now and again expressively. He did not speak. Mayce took his receipt and went out.

At least it was done. He had confessed all ; no, that wasn't it. Confession ? He had come out splendidly, superbly ; made a clean breast of it. British to the core. His letters—which he wrote on the lawyer's advice—were journalistic masterpieces. His newspaper should be proud of him ; it should stand by him. His newspaper should have the case well reported ; with good heads. Oh, if it had to be done, he ought to be there. " Mayce stood up in court ; and said : ' I love her, m'Lord'."

Only, not yet. . . .

Soon he was to cover Frances Falaise's New York first night, as guest critic. That came top of all. And he had the stuff about her wealthy mother and her son.

He had thought of something else too. No one had thought of it save himself. It was a thing he would not talk about. It had to happen suddenly and dramatically when the moment came. The country—perhaps women all over the world—would read of his noble decision, made even against the best legal advice.

•June, he knew, had hardly established in what passed for her mind that—after the labour of birth, after the long waiting—Wycombe could yet stand up in court, and say—

despite the co-respondent's courage—"This child was born in wedlock, I take it."

Of course he had to hope that Wycombe would play this part as written for him thus. "Why," Mayce said to himself aloud, standing still in Fifth Avenue, "of course he will!" And he thought:

"I can read a man's heart better than any of these psychiatrists. He'll do it for revenge. He'll take it out of the child. I'll do a long article for the paper, standing up to my sins—I've got to stand up to 'em. . . ."

But he closed up now. Better not to rehearse any more, even in the streets as he walked along, what he had in mind. The copy was his own; and no one else's.

What about photographs when the time was ripe?

"I'll take poor little June to Hannon's and have some beauties taken of her . . . some of the best Press stills. . . . It'll be a riot."

But, all the same, he wasn't going back till he felt more sure; till his imagination had steadied somewhat.

He had written the "No defence" letter; and it was mailed. He stood before the world nobly; and confessed his love for a woman.

That lawyer was technically right. Chivalry was forced upon him, and he offered his protection with a glad hand. Think!

"Honour has no price," said Philip Mayce yesterday in the witness-box. "I stand by this woman before all else." His lordship silenced the cheering. . . .

He could just see the papers; see the people, who had listened to the case, wait for him to emerge from that sad court, to slap his back; the women who would be tearful and laughing too. . . .

However, enough to think of day by day ; days crowded with his plans. There came to Mayce, still not appreciated at his true worth, a cable.

For awhile he could not open it . . . he was too sensitive for all this. He sweated. "Twins," he read. "June very ill."

"Pray heaven . . . pray heaven . . . Oh, God Almighty ! 'Very ill' . . . What a mess !"

But he must wait—he the visiting London journalist who knew the American star so well from smart London parties—for the Falaise first night. He let two days slip by before he cabled his love ; and his promise to stand by ; and so on. He cabled flowers correctly. . . . Home soon.

Home to what ? Three days later came the news that the case was to be heard in a month.

Well, the Falaise was back. She had had her rest, playing in the country with her son, at Grandmother's house. And now she began to rehearse. He would not deny that he had had his cut in London—though he had not covered it there. But he smiled ; drawled : "Maybe. Yes. But there's sure some more."

"You're on our stamping ground now," they teased ; "but we'll take you along."

"Boys, you know me now. I'll keep off your grass."

Lordy ! Lordy ! What a night ! Her London first night was nothing to it. This country did it big ! Mayce looked round from his seat—smart as smart—the famous London critic—and saw the tiers of faces rising to the ceiling ; in the vast house there must have been six thousand—all expectant. He would certainly go behind the scenes ; meet her elegant New York friends. And look at the women ! Count the film-stars there watching the play for their parts ! Priceless furs ; blazing jewels ! His eyes lifted to Mrs. Falaise's first-tier box ; and saw that she was known throughout the

theatre. He would call in the interval—he must see his face among “those known” in the morning’s papers.

Did it linger in his mind : “ *June is very ill* ” ? No. Life and death were in no man’s hand. He had shuddered at the words—but they slipped off him after he had duly registered emotion.

There was Mrs. Wycombe going into Mrs. Falaise’s box—a guest, settling herself in the way women did. Brilliantly alive—she wore good jewels too. Bertie was paying his call there before taking his seat in the stalls. Follett left the box shortly before the curtain rose. . . .

Bertie and Follett. . . . Young lover and the old spoke together and sat together; and remembered only what they wished ; all of it was sweet.

For a moment, looking at them, and away again, Mayce felt embarrassed ; unknowledgeable ; a clumsy groper ; even shy.

But suddenly his mind moved with the movements of minds throughout the house ; shared the breath—long drawn—of anticipation.

The curtain rose. The New York critic sitting beside Mayce gave him a glance of greeting. Already he was sufficiently known for a man of the theatre to note his presence. And, for that evening, he felt himself a man of fortune.

His visit—in the first interval—to Mrs. Falaise’s box would be a big success, he was sure. And during the ten minutes which followed his entry he made himself charming—in spite of a noticeable coolness—not only to her but to Mrs. Wycombe—who must be persuaded to think kindly. He managed a word in her ear, about the pending case . . . “ in love with her long before your son was . . . she was so young . . . I went away ; I kept away ; but when we met again . . . ” His low voice modulated for her ear only. “ Now I am desperately anxious—oh, desperately, I assure you, dear lady ; she is a very dear child. . . . ”

"I think you should fly to her tomorrow. In fact, to-night."

"You know, then?"

"Yes. Her mother promised to cable me."

Her mother!

"And you really think . . ." he stammered.

"Ask yourself," she said, coldly and directly, with a look into his eyes that became a stare. "Where else should you be?"

"I want to go. I wanted to go as soon as I had that cable. But I know that if there is the slightest hope of reconciliation it is for me to stand aside. . . . I assure you it is difficult for a man to fight all that out with himself. . . . If only I could suffer for her. . . ."

"How impossible!" said Mrs. Wycombe.

In the next intervals she evidently explained the case to Mrs. Falaise; for he was beckoned up again. And as he rose with alacrity to their signal he cursed them quietly because he wanted instead to have a peep at Frances Falaise, to whom he had sent red roses. But it was the old woman again; and Mrs. Falaise said she had heard the sad story; and he should put all else aside and fly to the poor girl, who must be wanting him above all others. They had an embarrassing way of examining him, and their eyes were mutually cold; mutually accusing. "I can well understand 'duty first'," said Mrs. Falaise smoothly, "but if you can be spared——" and she, too, knew that he could; she, too, had assessed his fears over the divorce case, over a suffering girl and her babies, and her accusing mother.

Besides, what was his bit of newspaper work—resounding to himself—to her?

He sighed; he stood up. He brushed his hand over his forehead. "It's a relief to hear you say so," he declared. "I have been worried over compromising her when the case isn't on yet—there's all that to think of; I assure both

of you my stay here has been one long misery of trying to know what is best for her."

"Best or worst, you should be there," said Mrs. Falaise. "There is a plane at nine o'clock. Oh, catch it, my dear Mr. Mayce. Even if I have to come with you right now—if it would help."

"It wouldn't," he said; and fled.

"What a truly dreadful man," said Mrs. Falaise. "He would let any woman down. I trust the poor thing won't marry him."

Diana was glad she had not risked refusal by asking Mrs. Falaise to sit in her box. As soon as Mrs. Falaise's affectionate invitation had come she had been able to return her box to the theatre—which was glad to have it back: "Ah yes, you are sitting with Mrs. Falaise, madam? That's nice. Mrs. Falaise is one of our best-known first-nighters." She had wanted to ask Bertie—had she kept the box—to be her own guest, just for these hours; but when the night came she saw that he would spend any between-act minutes with Mrs. Falaise.

She had sent Frances a huge bouquet of white roses—longing to write: *With Mother's dear love*. But the other mother would have written just so.

There could have been nothing more affectionate and open-hearted than her welcome by Mrs. Falaise.

She made the great effort of being equal to Mrs. Falaise's friends who dropped in between the acts and were introduced to her. It interested them to know that she had seen the play in London. It seemed to give her a worldly cosmopolitan flavour; to this one could rise to one's advantage.

Mrs. Falaise was all that was gracious. "My dear"—"My dear—this is Mrs. Wycombe, over from England—she's staying at the Plaza. Everyone wants to know her—but she says she is just leaving us!"

All scintillated—for Frances Falaise; this great night; this massed audience who could not stop cheering; this splendid theatre—all for her!

"And she is my daughter. My baby. My own."

As the last curtain fell on a roaring, cheering house :

"Do you know, I think I will go home too," said Mrs. Wycombe steadily, rising with her hostess, taking her hand ; proud ; bewildered ; bereft.

They held hands.

"Yes, go home," said Mrs. Falaise. "Go right back ; though we're broken-hearted to lose you."

They looked at each other for what seemed a long time, while the surging audience still cheered, and then sang : "*We want Frances ! We want our girl !*"

So the curtains parted once more and she came on, first alone—then her leading man followed ; and they stood smiling ; and she kissed her hands over and over again to the cheering people who would not go home.

During the cheers • "I will leave you now then, thanking you from my heart," Mrs. Wycombe said. "And with love and congratulations to your Frances. . . . I'll have to pack. . . ." And she pressed Mrs. Falaise's hand, so firm on hers ; she looked into Mrs. Falaise's eyes, and, just as generously, they looked back.

She went out alone.

Well, she had seen again her last baby—and her last baby's son ; and no grandmother could wish for a better. Only he was not for her.

In the morning she asked for all the papers to take with her on a sudden return journey to England. She knew, of course, that Philip Mayce would not be travelling ; he would still be reading the papers himself, garnering up whatever alluded to him ; smiling over it ; again oblivious of the girl far off in London with her frowsy mother and her two babies.

Oh, lonely morning ! Lonely morning !

She rose very early to pack.

Just before twelve her telephone rang. And it was Bertie.

"Mrs. Wycombe? Good morning. I really did not get time to wish you Godspeed," he said. "May I have the pleasure of taking care of you this morning and seeing you off?"

Oh... oh... oh... "Oh, how kind of you. Oh, I've ordered a—a—taxi——"

"I will cancel it. I am right here at the desk downstairs. Shall I come up to your flat? You need not start for quite a half-hour yet."

"Oh yes. Of course. Oh, how good of you! . . . Quite a surprise. . . . It's very nice of a young man to spare time. . . ."

"No. A pleasure. I'll see to it all. Don't bother about a thing. I'll come up. They're sending up a maid too! . . ."

During the slight wait she looked at herself. She went from fatigue and sadness and pallor—not being a clever woman with make-up—to a woman radiant with unexpected joy. She was dressed—yes, she had been really extravagant with clothes—in a Fifth Avenue suit—glove fitting; hat a dream; neat and slick—well, she had tried to copy those women whom she had seen in the luxurious club on Park Avenue to which membership of her London club had entitled her. Oh! She looked wonderful! At fifty-six . . . She ran from mirror to mirror. She had been extravagant with stockings here too. . . . Her doorbell rang; first the neat maid came and slipped through into the bedroom. . . . The bell rang again and she opened it to him, smiling—for the moment no care in the world. Successful in life; splendid—would that not be what he wanted in a mother? Not that she could supplant . . . Could she?

For one moment she lost her mind—so that from far places and times she expected to see the thin lithe young man in the old tweed jacket and flannel trousers he would have worn when he went away. Slipped away. With an old rainproof coat slung over his shoulders and his old bag. . . . On that day so long ago she had gone through all his clothes—and what he wore and carried were all he took.

He stood outside her door now, smiling—in a sleek tweed suit; hat in hand; shoes shined to high gloss; sure of himself and the world.

Proud! Proud! Oh, she was proud.

She stood aside and he followed her in. "How very nice of a young man to spare time for me!" she almost faltered. She was smiling more radiantly than she knew. "It isn't quite time to go yet; is it?"

"No, not time to go. I thought you would like to do it leisurely."

"Let . . . let us send for coffee—or—or a highball."

"Which do you want?"

"Well, coffee, I think. But you—a highball?"

"It is not yet twelve. Your plane does not go till twelve-thirty . . . bad weather over the Atlantic last night. Let me call down. I have champagne here. I would like to drink champagne with you, Mrs. Wycombe."

"Oh well, yes. . . . What fun! I Wasn't it a wonderful first night?"

"Hers always are. She's getting horribly spoiled. But always a darling. A sweetheart, isn't she? Glasses? May I?"

Glasses and an ice bucket came directly he telephoned. He was pouring the champagne—just the first glass-ful to toast her, while the bottle might repose in the bucket. He turned it about in the ice handily. She was in almost a trance of delight; looking at him . . . looking. Her firstborn. For this moment her own.

"How proud your mother must be this morning!" she said steadily.

"She is. And she was so glad to have you with her."

"She has been most kind to me."

"She is always kind. Too kind. I have been very lucky, Mrs. Wycombe."

"Yes. And I am glad you know it. That must make your mother happy."

"Now tell me how *you* have liked New York."

"Oh, very much indeed. But I have seen so little, of course. Yet more than I expected."

"You sound like a woman on a quest."

"How clever of you to guess it. I am—or, rather, I was."

"Do you live in London at home?"

"No. In the country. My husband died recently; and my sons are married. The old home is sold; and I have retired for the time into what I shall call a kind of dower-house. So suddenly I have restless feet."

The news had already become stale to her—because she had told it before; because she had beaten over the ground of it so much. "Women of my age have to think of the past—because they don't find their future very alluring," she said, smiling.

"Everyone has a future," he said, and she saw his face become resolute. "That's what we learn out here. You have a future too; and you are responsible for it, Mrs. Wycombe—just as you have always been responsible for your future. One falls; one bungles, perhaps; but on the whole one must carry the load."

She smiled. "Yes. I have carried the load more years than you have, though. But . . . but don't be sorry for me today!"

"The day comes," he said, "when the load is taken from one. And what has been wasted in the carrying is wasted. That's all."

"You must marry and have children before you find out some things," she said.

"Yes. And I am marrying—and shall have children. And I shall do my best by them."

"I am sure you will." And she longed to ask if it would be the lovely girl at Mrs. Falaise's house on that memorable Sunday.

But she must leave it alone.

He topped up her glass ; and she drank ; and then they got up and stood together.

"Do you know I am your mother ?" she said in the softest of voices. And he said quite quietly :

"No."

"Frances . . . Irene—does not know it either ?"

"No."

"Is there time to talk a little more ?"

"I fear there isn't much." He glanced at a wristwatch.

"In fact I must ring down for your bags to be fetched." He walked over to the telephone.

"We had to have this talk," he said, his eyes on her. And then : "Send the porter for Mrs. Wycombe's baggage, please. . . . Yes, we had to have this talk ; and we both knew it, when I was in London. But now it is over, dear lady. We are great friends. That is something. If you wanted me—if you were in trouble—you may call me from the ends of the earth. I would come. And now, the porter. . . ."

He flung open the door ; the porter came in to collect the baggage. She was stimulated by the champagne ; as he had hoped she would be.

But she felt cold ; lonely.

"This is how it ends then," she said to herself. "It is ended."

He was watching her.

"When you come to England again —perhaps on honeymoon——" she began.

"Very likely on honeymoon for a few days," he said. "I have business there and in Paris. Also in Germany——"

"Come to see me."

"We will."

"A promise ?"

"A promise."

"Give her my dear love. . . ."

He did not answer ; just helped her to collect her bag,

her gloves—just looked about with the swift eyes of a man who has learned to be careful. And they left the room.

At the desk she had her cheque ready. The management gave her a regretful *au revoir*. The head porter said : “Come again.” She was beside her son in his swift car, running towards the airfield. They were there. She saw the giant planes standing obediently—oh, so obedient, it seemed to her—immobile. But the rush of loading, of shepherding passengers all went on.

Bertie turned in his seat, held her a light moment and kissed her cheek. “I always kiss my women friends. Goodbye, my dear.” They got out together.

And suddenly, as they stood together, aside from the other passengers, they were looking at each other—looking—looking, with the veils lifted . . . oh, surely in this moment the veils were lifted ! He put his hands on her shoulders ; and then his arms slid round her and his face touched hers : and they kissed for all the lost kisses.

“Goodbye, my English mother,” he said, and kept his cheek for long moments against hers.

“Goodbye, my darling,” she breathed. “Goodbye.”

“And now get aboard, dear,” he said. And she turned away ; blinded with joyful tears ; and he guided her to the steps.

Her firstborn son.

“Don’t cry, dear,” he said.

“I—I rejoice. Do you remember——”

Do you remember? . . . And do you remember?

“Next time,” he said, guiding her to her seat.

“Next time we will remember all,” she pleaded.

Then she was looking down upon him, crying and smiling ; and he waited, looking up at her.

So she was away, with her great quest over ; knowing her fate and her fortune. And she had done it alone ; settled

life's accounts ; thanked those who had given her brief friendship ; sent a wire to her grandson—that was wilful of her ; for she had no claims ; he would perhaps not even remember her—just a British lady who came to lunch.

She had thanked Mrs. Falaise—just a charming letter from one well-bred woman to another. But to Frances Falaise it would not be too strange to send a telegram—an admirer to a star—when she arrived on the other side. And as the 'plane rose into the sky she gathered all her hopes back to her breast ; all her loving days of years ago when she had cuddled down in bed with the new, last baby beside her. They were always kept in another room since she did not feed them but they were brought sometimes—the professional nurse looking at her queerly. But still, she had made rapt discovery how babies turn naturally to the breast—even to the poor bound breast ; and she had never lost the memories of those tiny expectant fingers of the meek and small ; the helpless who trusted her and received no delight. . . .

The airfield had vanished below ; she liked this losing of oneself in sheer space ; it was a kind of happy amnesia.

Chapter 9

SHE went first to her London club, with her suitcases and her hatboxes. From there she telephoned Rivers and said she would be down in a day or two. She wanted to telephone her son Charles at his office after she had tried the Hampton house and heard from the manservant that her daughter-in-law was "away". But for the moment she refrained. But she telephoned her daughter-in-law April, and spoke brightly to say she was back from her trip ; and April answered guardedly, and could not come to lunch. So sorry. . . . Then she got her daughter Clare, and asked her to come—very

well, to tea then. So lovely to see her again. And she spoke to Marion too, and Marion sounded very bright and busy. "We'd love to see you, Mother. Had a good trip? How long will you be in Town?"

And she said she was going home tomorrow morning. But they must all meet soon; and—yes, it had been a lovely trip, and she had met such interesting people. But of course it was good to be home.

Then she telephoned Charles.

He said he would like to come along to lunch with her alone. So, big and resolute, like his father—oh, how like!—he arrived. He was a little startled; and she was feminine enough to enjoy it. She wore her exquisite American clothes with an air. And she looked years younger. She had a new make-up which looked so nice and was so undetectable that he detected it for its quality of undetectability, and disapproved. One's girl—yes. One's wife—maybe. One's mother—no!

She was different too. . . .

Also she had, in some way, grown beyond him. Of course he had known that he had grown beyond her; but now she also had this quality. Had he had reason to think about her at all, he would have considered her as a homely woman, beyond her prime, who had lived quietly and would continue to do so.

She wore no hat at lunch; and had her hair dressed in a new fashion. "You look *very* well," he had said formally, touching his cheek to hers.

"I am well. I've been busy," she said. And indeed she had been busy transforming herself into a new woman.

"Charles," she said, "how is your wife?" Asked coolly, yet he felt inclined to make immediate disclosures.

"I am divorcing her. For a fellow called Mayce. Writer fellow. When you went away she was—if I may so put it—in foal by him."

"You may not so put it," she said.

"Oh, don't get sorry for her. He's gone off to America on a job."

"I happened to meet him there."

"Oh." He looked blank.

"A horrid type."

He looked at her in surprise.

"Well, he's for it. She's at her mother's."

"I remember her mother. Now, dear, what will you have?"

Soon their choices were made, and they had begun the first course. "When is the divorce?" she asked quietly.

"When she is fit. The twins were born in wedlock. . . ."

Something about his voice caused her to say: "Well, you would hardly wish to put a pregnant woman in the divorce court, I daresay."

"No. I am taking the children at once."

Something like shock, or fear, ran through Mrs. Wycombe. And in a few moments the whole implication of that ran through her head. He was already adding that June was lucky. She was lucky that she could foist the children on him. Diana said: "Fate is very cruel sometimes. The poor children!"

"I'm not very flattered by that, mother."

"I'm sorry—but the children will be very lonely if you mean to take them. Lonely. . . ."

"I shall take them."

"Well," she said wisely, "perhaps it will be lucky. But then, dear, won't you marry again and have your own?"

"Maybe," he agreed.

"Now," she said, "tell me your own news. About yourself. How do things go? Beautifully, I daresay, as usual. I have very capable clever sons." She put a subtly flattering note into her voice, and saw him respond to it. "You are so effective, dear," she added. "So very effective?"

"Well," he cast a look at her, "you're very effective-looking yourself today."

"My dear ! An old woman."

"Only if you say so."

All the same, he knew he did not like her looking young. He could not have said why. But it somehow made her invulnerable. She had been through the long complexity of family affairs, and come out like this. It was a little wrong. He asked when she was going down home ; and when she said she was going tomorrow, he asked her—somewhat sulkily—if she would care for a theatre tonight. Dinner, of course. It happened that she would like it very much. Tomorrow, she said, she was going to see June's mother before she went down home. He realised that she felt herself entirely under her own control, and no one else would ever sway her again. He had noticed invulnerable widows before.

He took her to a musical show. He was living up at his club, he said, pending the sale of his Hampton house. A clean sweep ? Yes !

She had laughed a great deal at the play ; disregarding Charles's somewhat disapproving surprise. And she thought a good deal about that visit to June's mother tomorrow.

.

She went in the morning. For her housekeeperly instinct told her that perhaps then the mother would be out, shopping. And, in fact, June opened the door. Time had run so swiftly that it was already eleven months since the weddings ; and the girl had not recovered from the births and the fear. The ordeal had dragged at her young face, and made great dark lines under her eyes. She had hardly a vestige in her of the bridal happiness with which she went triumphantly through her marriage day.

She did not flinch ; but stood suddenly sullen. But Mrs. Wycombe found the despair under the sullenness. That was merely a mask, not very adeptly contrived. "How are you,

my dear ? ” she said lightly, stepping in. “ I suppose this is a tiresome time to come and see your mother—but I am just home from America ; and I have heard.”

So she was in the flat, finding all as she would have supposed—the unimaginative *décor* ; the shabby paint ; the peeling ceiling and the total lack of grace.

“ I am so sorry ; so sorry for everything,” she said at once. “ But I can help, you know.”

She slipped her hand into June’s and they sat down together. Then the storm of tears was no more than she expected. And just then the mother came in, toiling under her heavy-laden flag basket ; which was stuffed full. Together they carried it into the kitchen ; and Mrs. Wycombe helped to unpack it. She commented in homely fashion on the quality of the vegetables. The other mother replied. Tea was made. All perfectly simple. June’s mother had her tale to tell—but not till June was safely out of the way.

Then : “ It was twins, as you know,” she said. “ Oh, how I called to God to help her ! She’s always been so afraid of pain. The doctor helped her all he could ; and she’s come through. She doesn’t want them, though. Oh ! She is bitter. Bitter ! ”

And so they sat, drinking tea, talking it out ; and Mrs. Wycombe suggested she should see the doctor when he came ; and soon they were just two women together, talking ; talking ; the language plain ; the outcome in little doubt. The other mother looked shrewdly into Mrs. Wycombe’s eyes ; and understood.

They were without envy or despair or criticism, the one of the other ; just seeking a way ; so that afterwards Mrs. Wycombe said to herself : “ Thank Heaven it was all so simple. Let me see the doctor alone,” she said now.

And when she had seen the doctor, and, later, had talked to Charles again, she had her way. The children were not to be June’s. But they were to be hers.

Mrs. Wycombe sat through the divorce case in which neither June nor her fat mother appeared. There was no defence. The case was quick. . . . And then, just as quickly, it seemed to Charles, Morris Newland appeared; took him off to lunch at the club; taking it for granted that this was to be a legal adoption. "No time like the present," he said, and Charles—very quiet and somewhat puzzled—agreed; and accompanied him to another lawyer who was said to represent June. "First-class lot," Morris observed as they went in. "Smooth out anything. Time your mother had a break. And look, Charles, I heard a pretty nice rumour about you; but I thought I wouldn't mention it till after it was all finished."

"You'd better not."

But Lady Julia Mervyn, who had sat through the case, was a significant figure; and Morris had not failed to see her. The reporters had mentioned her too. Some of her friends were also in court. Mrs. Wycombe mentioned the elegant figures to Charles; and he replied: "Oh, that's Julia and her pals—got an idea of cheering me up—fools!" Yet Mrs. Wycombe divined why the house at Roehampton had been already sold; to be succeeded by a flat in Town and a country cottage.

"We shall see," Morris said to her. "He is marrying again as soon as the divorce is through. I am telling you this, my dear, because I want you to begin learning life as you never did till now. As for the children, I don't think his wife will ever want them. Although—one can't be sure. If she wanted them it would only be for cruelty."

Then she thought of Lady Julia's face. She had looked at it very carefully once before. The face of a woman capable of harsh acts which could be explained on the side of righteousness. The face of a woman who could ruin those two helpless ones in the name of charity and pity.

Such a woman knew the cruel flow of human minds—but she did not know—she had not the wits—the natural flow

of pity and kindness. In fact, in her way, she was little ; ignorant as June herself.

Diana telephoned Morris ; and he came to hear her thoughts. He came also to the muddled flat and saw for himself. . . . Then he took Diana out to lunch.

" I've done it. Just your signature remains. . . . Now quietly—quietly ! "

Quietly it was done.

" She didn't want to feed them. . . . There's already a man she wants more. Her mother told me. She can't saddle him with a ready-made family, even if Charles let her have them. They will be all mine ! "

" It all sounds well done, Diana. But leave yourself in my hands till the last item is safe and sound. No loopholes. You are learning, dear."

He laughed at her. " What are you going to do with that predatory mother ? "

" Predatory ? "

" Might be," he said ; and he was enjoying himself ; for now she was very close to him. And he realised more each day how he had loved her for longer than he had known. . . . She was musing aloud : " Why are people so gutless ? So witless, Morris ? "

" They aren't really. The girl's mother hasn't had your weapons : your start in life ; the gracious things you've had. Oh yes ! You're learning, Diana."

He took her down to Kew. The gardens were beautiful this late summer that was merging so richly into autumn. They walked and talked.

He asked her again if she would marry him ; and when. And she put him off.

" You won't always do that," he said. " One day you'll risk me. Coming down again—when ? We must get the nurseries ready. Why not come this afternoon ? I'll drive you back to the club and you can pack ; and when you're ready, there I'll be—waiting."

Impulsively she surrendered.

"Sharing a house with Miss Rivers," he said later, as the miles slipped from their wheels—"is that really your idea of how to spend your life?"

She knew it was not her idea; and said so.

She had an unbelievable feeling of belonging, as the car ran on, with her shoulder against his.

"At least you've made an admission," he said. "But perhaps you've learned something in America."

"Yes. I did. Stay to dinner."

Rivers had a headache. It developed this early evening when she saw who had brought Mrs. Wycombe home. So a tray in bed for her, she said with effusive apologies. And she began to wonder sadly how much longer there would be need for her. . . . But Morris Newland, opening the door for her, said she must get that head right quickly—for how could she be spared, with a new load of trouble coming on her? It was a jest, but she took it seriously; and closed herself into her room, wondering.

"Diana," he said when he was seated near her again, "now make up your mind and marry me. No more troubles, my dear. Two babies brought into the house at once—at least when our honeymoon's over. The girl will be well and at work again then. Her mother—as you say—will be as usual. And though you may not think so, soon that young mother will have forgotten her children; the first time a young fellow takes her out she'll find as urgent a wish in her head that she hadn't had all the troubles; she'll be longing to leave everything behind. And part of what she'll long to leave behind—when it comes to it—are the babies. For you see, my dear, young husbands don't want those. Wait and see. Just wait and see. But don't wait too long, Diana. Not too long."

That evening she promised to marry Morris Newland.

They sat a long time by the wood fire; and talked. He

asked if he might smoke his pipe ; and it occurred to her that a man smoking his pipe is very restful.

Her body relaxed and her eyes were at peace. He led her to talk about her children, so that as she parted with her quiet secrets he could help her. Robert she didn't worry about. He was well suited with April and her background of nice family. They would have two children, she thought ; and be much like her daughters and their husbands. Then she had found Bertie and Irene—beyond her reaching hand, beyond her love and her grief and power of attachment. And Irene had a wonderful son. A beautiful child who was growing up splendidly. Their lives had been remade ; neither had any use or desire for the past.

“ They have gone, Morris.”

She had told him everything.

She had said : “ When I used to think of those two, it was always with fear. How had they found their feet where they had gone ? Where had they gone ? Once, at the beginning, I was melodramatic. I threw myself down at Charlie's feet ; and tried to tell him what they were really like. . . . He believed nothing except his own opinion. But when I did that, at last he began a real search. But it was too slow and too limited. At first he drew up a list of the people they might have gone to—and then he made inquiries—not urgent enquiries but casual ones. He was too proud to think anything could go wrong with his ruling. . . .”

“ But later on I think . . . ? ”

“ Yes. When I was very ill he went to the police. Detectives could trace nothing. They always said it would be a sure thing in the end. But it wasn't. No one ever found them. Until . . . ”

“ Well, you found them.”

“ We have greeted each other as strangers ; said good-bye like passing acquaintances. And that is all, except just for a wonderful goodbye from *him*. ‘ My English mother,’

he said. . . . Now I'll wait. He kissed me. . . . I didn't mention Charlie because he has gone. You see, Morris, I had not looked for splendid and successful people in no need of comfort ; too proud to remember ; too disdainful of our conception of life. But, my God, I'm proud."

"Proud you may well be, dear." He came to sit on the arm of her chair and put his arm round her. It was all familiar—the lazily flickering fire, the books, and sheen of the walls and ceiling ; mellow light. Quiet. Peace. He said : "Talk it all out," and she answered that there was no more to say. Then he said : "Tomorrow come and see what you want in our house. Because you're not going to keep me long now, are you ?"

"A nursery for the twins ?"

"A nursery for the twins ; and by that time remember I've prophesied—they will be forever and entirely ours."

She turned her face up to kiss Morris ; and he leaned down to her.

"I shall see Charles—it is to be an adoption ; no obscurities—you'll have their futures, their joys and sorrows, their successes, their happiness, on your shoulders, dear. And so shall I."

"Well . . . a nursery of my own."

She did not say "again"—for indeed she had never felt she had a nursery of her own.

"And June ?"

"I'll ask her what she wants to do," she said.

He kept silence—for he could foresee that—so he thought. If she married again, she wouldn't want to tell her husband of the children ; of the divorce and the desertion by the man. Yet maybe she would have no choice of that. At the same time Charles had manoeuvred to keep most of it from the papers, because Lady Julia would not care for the idea of his first choice.

"Very messy, quite grubby," she had said. "Can't you get it kept out ? After all, she won't contest it ; and you can

say as little as possible. Counsel are very clever ; they'll agree to manage it between them. And a cheque to the mother. . . ."

"There's that fellow Mayce. . . ."

"I dare say you can see to him. He's only too glad to be left where he is. And, anyway, I think my father would get it kept out of the principal papers. There's a really big case coming on soon. . . ."

"So there is," Charles thought. Friends of hers were in for a racket of a time ; and he could actually recall being jealous of the man in the case. But he had Julia now ; with all her personal and social equipment. Moreover, he had Morris Newland's letter ; and had replied heartily and with gratitude. The children were as much his mother's and Morris's as if they had been born of them. . . .

"We look forward to adopting them," Morris wrote. "Legal adoption ; with no one intervening."

In a cordial letter Charles accepted this, with no reservations. "In kindness to the children," he replied, "I feel I have to agree. . . ."

And now Morris and Diana were to be seen about the neighbourhood, always together. And the countryside saw romance on the grand scale. And the story of the Wycombes took a new turn. There was no vestige left of Charlie's *régime* ; and often Diana felt disloyal and ashamed.

But Morris watched her ; and one day he took both her hands and said : "Darling, in these four hands lie no people except us—and the twins."

That was when she gave him her promise that it should be so.

"And another thing, darling," said Morris. "Don't fret about your Bertie or your Frances. I wouldn't be surprised if, before long—that is when these two eminences have time—they will give a little of that time to you."

She forgot, one Sunday, to put fresh flowers on Charlie's grave ; and was bitterly ashamed. She told Morris, who

said : " From a man's point of view, he was a good fellow ; and he doesn't mind."

Then she was married and the honeymoon was quiet and immensely happy ; the whole neighbourhood wishing her well. And when she returned there were the babies settled in with a nurse and Rivers ; and during dinner she said to Morris : " One day—~~one~~ day—Irene and Bertie will come back to me ; and accept me ; and go away again. But they will have said, ' Mother.' And perhaps they will have understood."

" Perhaps, darling," he said. And he thought :

" Give her time."

